

Sunday October 8th, 2023
Thanksgiving

“Giving Thanks in All Things; Really?”
Philippians 4:1-9

A foursome of senior golfers hit the course with waning enthusiasm for the sport. "These fairways seem to be getting longer and longer," said one of the four-some. "And these hills are getting steeper as the years go by," another complained. "The sand traps seem to be bigger than I remember them, too," said the third senior. After hearing enough from his buddies, the oldest, and the wisest of the four of them at 87 years old, piped up and said, "Oh my friends, just be thankful we're still on this side of the grass!"

The most important attitude that we will ever nurture, that we will ever exhibit, is the attitude of thanksgiving. However, I maybe convicted by scripture by this fact, but given our current circumstance in recent and perhaps ongoing pandemics, I find it is not easy to cultivate. All of us have been hard pressed to feel very thankful on this special holiday.

However, everything we know, and experience, tells us that the attitude of thankfulness makes a significant difference in our state of mind and attitude. Personally, this year has been traumatic and difficult. Many days I spent in uncertainty and fear, so when someone says to me to give thanks in all things, even if it is the Apostle Paul, I reply, really! How can you suggest such a thing Paul when you yourself are in prison? Not just any prison either. A Roman one.

These prison facilities were little more than underground caves, that were accessed by a manhole sized entrance. These horrible places were very dark and very damp and very crowded. It was dark enough that Paul likely had to dictate his letter, because he could not see well enough. Still in this miserable place, Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, says, "Make your petitions known. Pray to God for what concerns you, what troubles you, what you desire; but, in everything, give thanks."

Left to our own devices, being thankful, and offering thanks to God in all things, is impossible. However, if we are able by the grace of God to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving in what we do, say, and are about: Paul is telling us that we will know a life that is at once more challenging and more fulfilling. This call to thanksgiving in all things, does not permit twisting our words to appear thankful when we are not.

I saw a cartoon not long ago of a family gathered for a common meal. The father said to the mother, "I don't want to complain about leftovers, but haven't we already said grace over this meal three times?" He didn't want to complain about leftovers ... but he did. He wanted to give thanks in all things, but he found that a little difficult to do. That is the great challenge before us today and frankly every day. But it is also an opportunity we have, to give thanks in all things.

Maybe we need to categorize our thankfulness. First, we may say we give thanks in all things obvious. So, what does that mean? All of us know, that there are some good things so close to home, so obvious, that we forget to give thanks for them. We would say we take them for granted. All of us know of what I speak. Instead of being thankful for routine gestures of care from our spouses, parents, and others: we grow to simply expect them.

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No wonder when our children are given something, we exhort our little ones; “now what do you say. Or when they pester us for a cookie or something else, we say, “What’s the magic word?” I’ve never been a fan of that last one. So, Paul, begins this letter by saying, "At every remembrance of you (or every time I think of you), I give thanks for you." The next time you recognize the following thought in your mind, or you hear it as you say it aloud, stop and take notice: "It goes without saying." When it comes to thanksgiving, it does not go without saying.

You remember that story about the ten lepers healed by Jesus? Nine went on their way, and only one came back. That one person, a Samaritan, knew that it doesn't go without saying. The first opportunity of giving thanks in all things — and thus changing our attitudes and our lives — is to give thanks for the obvious things. These are the people, and other blessings, so close that we seem to look right past them.

Several of us were raised in very stoic circumstances, where we were encouraged to hide our emotions. “Big boys don’t cry” is an example. Some of us know people who struggle or refuse to express their feelings very freely. The story goes of a farmer, who loved his wife and appreciated her so much that one day he “almost” told her so. Almost is how we often attempt thankfulness. That's the way we are sometimes. It's so obvious that we forget to give thanks.

The Psalmist says we are to give thanks for God's benefits. Think for a moment of the benefits of being here right now. Not just in the building but being alive. As beings, we can laugh and sing and cry. These benefits are a part of God's wonderful love for us. One of the greatest benefits of being fully alive is to give thanks for all of God's benefits. So, what benefits go unnoticed because they are too obvious?

As we know many children, it would be interesting to ask, "Have you ever given thanks for the wonderful miracle of your body?" A great architect said there's been no invention like the human hand, and it's true.

Children (of all ages), have you thought about your noses lately? Suppose that your nose was on upside down. Every time you would sneeze, you'd blow your hat off. That's right. And if your nose was on upside down, when it rains, you'd drown. That may sound silly, but you know what I think is sillier? Forgetting to give thanks to God who created this marvelous miracle called our body. The Bible says we are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are!

Although we are wonderfully made, we're too small to cling to all the thankfulness that wells up in us. When we want to thank God, it spills over, and we begin thanking other people. When we're truly thankful to God, we begin to thank people for what they have meant to us. We write a note. We make a phone call. We stop a person in our busy schedule and say, "You know, I really appreciate you." Thanksgiving — it is not a time of the year but an attitude of the heart that changes people. We are to give thanks in all things obvious.

We might also encourage each other that in all things obscure, to give thanks. Obscure? What does that mean? It means blessings and opportunities that are hidden, people that we don't see right away, things that seem of little value until we take a closer look. In this passage Paul says, "Whatever is true, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report or gracious ... think on these things."

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It means to calculate. Stop and ponder. Think about them for a while and begin to see that these "things obscure" go beyond our casual seeing. "Give thanks for those things that are true." That word is a wonderful word. It means not only that which is true in terms of truth-telling, or honest speaking, but also those things that are solid, of lasting substance. It is not what flits away, is here today and gone tomorrow, but the enduring things: to give thanks for friendships that don't just blow away in tough times; to give thanks for a marriage through "for better and worse".

At a conference, some years ago, where the President of Princeton Seminary was the speaker. His daughter came to him one day and said, "I've looked around and there just aren't any good marriages. I'm so discouraged. I don't want to get married." I've heard that many times and I must admit that I can see how it seems to be true. But I loved his response. He said, "I'll tell you one marriage that's good. It's the marriage of your mother and I." She said, "Oh, that doesn't count." And he said, "It counts!"

And that's what I want to say, it counts! It counts to give thanks for those things that are true and that endure. Paul says whatever things are lovely, think on those things. This suggests that whatever people are loveable and amiable, give thanks for them. There is a famous psychologist who calls some folks "noxious people." They are people who seem to make us sick because they're always negative and pointing out our foibles, inconsistencies, and the things we've done wrong. But he says there are also "nourishing people" in our lives.

Give thanks for those who nourish you, who feed you, who are a part of God's gracious plan to build you up. Whatever things are of good report, whatever things are valuable, give thanks for them. Even though you can't see the value at first: meditate, calculate, reckon, think on them and they become clearer. Even in those things that are obscure, give thanks.

This last one is the hardest of all. In all things objectionable, give thanks. I deliberately saved the toughest for last and you all know it. In all things objectionable, give thanks. This is the one with which we have the most difficulty. This has been certainly true for me these past few years. It is hard to be thankful ravaged by an infection, laying in a hospital bed and undergoing major surgery. How do you give thanks for that?

Paul says we are to give thanks in all things. Not somethings, but all things. Not just the pleasant and the good, but the bad and difficult as well. "Do you mean to say I am to give thanks for this tough patch that I am going through?" "Am I supposed to give thanks for this thorn in the flesh that doesn't seem to be taken from me?" This a tough one, isn't it? But if we are to have an attitude of thanks that can transform the situation, we are to give thanks in all things even if they are objectionable.

Quite naturally you may say, "I'm not going to give thanks for this illness," or "I'm not going to give thanks for what this person has done to me." Then at least start here: Give thanks for the presence of God in that situation, that God has not left you. Even though you had a setback, God is still present and willing to redeem the situation. Then there's the next step. Begin to realize that even through the worst circumstances God can work. Isn't the risen, living Christ the great reminder that even the evil of the cross can be transformed into new and exalted life?

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I remember one of my favourite stories about Corrie ten Boom. Her book "The Hiding Place" was read by millions including yours truly. She died after many years of serving the Lord. What a remarkable, gracious lady. She and her family lived through the Nazi holocaust, and they hid Jewish people in their home who would otherwise have been killed. Their act of compassion for Jewish neighbours landed them in jail, eventually a concentration camp. When Corrie was in a Nazi prison camp it was such a flea-ridden, terrible place that she couldn't stand it.

Her older sister Betsy said, "But I have found something in the Bible that will help us. It says, 'In all things, give thanks'." Corrie said, "I can't give thanks for the fleas." Betsy said, "Give thanks that we're together. Most families have been split up." Corrie thought, "I can do that."

Her sister continued, "Give thanks that somehow the guards didn't check our belongings and our Bible is with us." She gave thanks for that. But Corrie would not even think of giving thanks for the fleas. Later they found out that the only reason they were not molested and harmed by the guards was because their "captors" were so repulsed by the fleas that they would not go in. Give thanks even for those lowly creatures!

In the town of Enterprise, Alabama, there is a monument in the middle of the town square. You'd think it's probably of a Confederate general. It's not. It's a monument to all things a boll weevil. A boll weevil is an animal, an insect, that destroys cotton. That town depended upon cotton. In 1915 the boll weevil destroyed their livelihood, but through this they learned the importance of diversified farming.

They learned to plant peanuts, corn, and other crops. In two years, they erected a monument to the boll weevil to be a reminder that through a terrible event, good things came to their town. The Old Testament patriarch Joseph said to his brothers, who sold him into slavery and would have killed him, "You meant this to be for evil, but God meant it for good." That was his monument to the power of God to bring good out of apparent evil.

When Mrs. Klein told her first graders to draw a picture of something for which they were thankful, she thought how little these children, who lived in a deteriorating neighborhood, had to be thankful for. She knew that most of the class would draw pictures of turkeys or of bountifully laden Thanksgiving tables. That was what they believed was expected of them.

What took Mrs. Klein aback was Douglas's picture. Douglas was so forlorn and likely to be found close in her shadow as they went outside for recess. Douglas's drawing was simply this: A hand, obviously, but whose hand? The class was captivated by his image. "I think it must be the hand of God that brings us food," said one student. "A farmer," said another, "because they grow the turkeys."

"It looks more like a policeman, and they protect us." "I think," said Lavinia, who was always so serious, "that it is supposed to be all the hands that help us, but Douglas could only draw one of them." Mrs. Klein had almost forgotten Douglas in her pleasure at finding the class so responsive. When she had the others at work on another project, she bent over his desk and asked whose hand it was. Douglas mumbled, "It's yours, Teacher." Then Mrs. Klein recalled that she had taken Douglas by the hand from time to time; she often did that with the children. But that it should have meant so much to Douglas ...

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We all have a hand reaching down to us. God can use even the worst in the circumstances of this fallen world to bring the best about. You know why we can believe that? Because God certainly did not want his Son to die on the cross but, when it became necessary, the despised instrument of death became the way we could come to know God. The cross became how we can give thanks in all things, those things obvious, obscure and even objectionable. In everything, therefore, give thanks.