

GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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**OCTOBER 8, 2017/18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(THANKSGIVING SUNDAY)**

Thanksgiving Sunday is one of a handful of Sundays in the year where I think the preacher's most pressing task is to avoid sliding into a collection of clichés.

I could very easily get up here and preach a sermon on why it's good to be thankful, on the many things that we should be thankful for, on how gratitude makes us better human beings, about the psychological benefits of being thankful, etc.

It would be simple to get up on Thanksgiving Sunday and do the equivalent of wagging my finger at you like a parent to a child, and exhorting you along the lines of, "Now you say thank you (and mean it)!"

That didn't seem like a terribly inspiring sermon—to preach or to hear.

So I thought I would take a different approach today.

Our scripture this morning begins with what I'm guessing is a familiar exhortation:

Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Biblical translators split this one sentence into three verses—almost like staccato notes in a piece of music.

Rejoice! Pray! Give thanks!

This is the will *of* God *in* Christ Jesus *for* you.

Many of us know this passage well. It has a kind of poetic cadence to it. It expresses some of the deepest aspirations of the Christian life that we really do believe ought to be characterized by joy, gratitude, and prayer.

And on days like Thanksgiving Sunday, when we are surrounded by evidence of bounty, when we are together with those we love, it seems obvious, natural, even.

But I'm guessing that I'm not the only one that paused, even if only for a second, on those three words in verse 18:

...in. all. circumstances.

All circumstances? This sounds... hard.

Not all circumstances naturally call forth our thanks. We know this, don't we?

What do we do with those three words?

Well, I decided that rather than pontificating on the feasibility of this command from 1 Thessalonians (and it is a command, not a suggestion), rather than lament my inability to give thanks as consistently as I ought to, I would do something radical and give this "in all circumstances" business a try.

It's customary on Thanksgiving to make lists of all the things we're thankful for. This is good and appropriate. We should be thankful for family, for food, clothing, and shelter, for freedom of worship, for meaningful work, for our church, etc.

I decided instead to make a short list of things that I'm *not* particularly thankful for in and of themselves, but which represent circumstances in which I am seeking to give thanks, circumstance which aren't necessarily pleasant and won't make many "here's what I'm thankful for" lists.

Circumstances that I am trying to allow the Spirit of Christ to use to shape me.

I have tried to frame these five in such a way that you can either easily substitute them for circumstances in your own lives or which are things that you very well might not feel particularly thankful for as well.

They will range from the personal to the global, from the perhaps somewhat humorous to the serious.

So, without further ado, “Five circumstances in which I am seeking to be thankful in”:

1. I give thanks in the midst of... a knee injury.

As you may know, as I have probably whined to many of you over the past five months, last spring I tore some ligaments in my knee playing soccer.

This is really the first serious—or at least long-term—injury I’ve ever had. I broke my jaw playing hockey in high school, I think I separated my shoulder once (also playing hockey). I’ve picked up the usual bumps and bruises and sprains and stitches along the way.

But I’ve never had an injury like this where the timeline for recovery wasn’t clear, and where I even heard the dreaded phrase, “Well, we don’t always do surgery for people your age...”

I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all.

I don’t like waiting months and months for an MRI (and probably even more months if surgery is required). I don’t like not being able to play hockey and soccer and squash and things I love to do. I don’t like doing physiotherapy and wearing a big clunky brace when I do anything remotely taxing on my knee.

But I am slowly learning to be thankful in this circumstance.

I am thankful for the reminder of my own mortality. It’s pretty easy to sail through life—particularly the early parts of life—thinking that you’re invincible.

But I’m not, of course. None of us are. To be a human being is to have things gradually begin to break down and fall apart.

I am thankful for little opportunities like an injured knee to learn how to trust God with an uncertain future.

I am thankful for the reminder that learning how to live well is also, in a way, learning how to die.

That sounds dramatic, I know. It's just a knee injury, after all!

But Psalm 90 teaches us to "number our days, that we might gain a heart of wisdom."

Part of what it means to number our days is to realize that we don't have an unlimited number of them. There is wisdom in coming to terms with this. And for this, I am grateful.

2. I give thanks in the midst of... my kids being away from us.

For those who are guests among us, a month ago we sent our grade 11 twins away to boarding school.

I did not anticipate being an empty nester at 42. That was never really part of the parenting playbook or the map that Naomi and I laid out for ourselves as young parents.

As happy as I am for my kids and for all they are learning and becoming, for all the ways in which they are being stretched and grown at RJC, part of me still wishes it wasn't happening seven hours away.

But I am grateful for the opportunities that they are getting. I am grateful for the new friends they are making. I am grateful for the life lessons (the good ones and the hard ones) that they will have the opportunity to learn.

I give thanks in this circumstance that reminds me that part of life is learning how to let go of things.

We all have to learn how to let go, don't we? Whether it's parents letting go of their kids or watching them move on to new stages of life, or its letting go of an old career that gave us meaning, or letting go of home and moving to a new city, or letting go of loved ones as they age and pass away... Or whether it's the final letting go of death.

Letting go involves embracing the God who holds all the things that we try to cling to, who promises that nothing good is finally lost.

And I am grateful for opportunities to learn this.

To practice trust instead of just talking about it.

To anchor myself in the conviction that my kids cannot go where God is not, that Christ goes before them, behind them, around them, and within them.

3. I give thanks in the midst of... hard stories.

To be a pastor is to hear hard stories.

I have had a number of people in the last few months tell me that they want to die. Sometimes, these have been very old people for whom death truly would be a mercy. Yesterday I sat and prayed with Doris Boehr who is nearing the end of her journey.

Sometimes it has been younger people struggling with depression and feeling like their lives had no meaning.

I have heard about extraordinarily dysfunctional families full of abuse and neglect and the almost total absence of love and kindness.

There are others, too. Too many to mention.

I am not thankful for hard stories. I don't like to see human beings in pain. I don't like to see human beings hurt those around them with the choices they make. None of us do.

But I give thanks in the midst of hard stories.

I am grateful for lives reaching their end, for opportunities to pray for saints to be welcomed into the care of Christ.

I give thanks for opportunities to bear one another's burdens, for opportunities to walk with Christ into the pain of the world and offer hope, the possibility of redemption, to extend mercy, to be a bearer of grace and pardon.

To tell people that they are loved, no matter what they have done.

These are gifts for which I give thanks.

4. I give thanks in the midst of... global unrest and political chaos

Bad news is everywhere, isn't it? Natural disasters, terrifying acts of violence... Economic uncertainty and head spinning cultural change. At times it can feel like nothing is stable, everything is up for grabs. It can be very easy to be fearful for the world that our kids are growing up in.

Yet I am grateful for these conditions that give us the opportunity to "test everything" to "hold fast to what is good" and to "abstain from every form of evil."

I give thanks for these circumstances that can provide the soil within which to grow lives that resist the consumerism and individualism of our day. I give thanks for these conditions within which faith, hope, and love can be grown, even amidst the weeds of cynicism, hatred, and despair.

I give thanks for the deep truth that the earth truly is the Lord's and all within it.

While we reel and wring our hands about the state of the world, I give thanks that God remains on his throne.

I give thanks that I follow the one who knew very well that "in this world we would have trouble," but who also said, "Take heart, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

5. I give thanks in the midst of... struggles of the church in the west.

Next weekend, I will be in Winnipeg for our National Assembly. As you know, the item on the agenda for these meetings is the restructuring of Mennonite Church Canada. We heard about this a few weeks ago when our area church pastor, Tim Wiebe Neufeld, was here.

The church, it is-a-changing. The church that many of us grew up in no longer exists. Gone are the days where every church was full, where almost all of our friends and neighbours shared our convictions, where church attendance was a "given."

We live in post-Christian times.

This can be unsettling, I know. I feel it. The way forward isn't always clear.

It must honestly be acknowledged that the restructuring we are undertaking is, at least in part, motivated by uncomfortable realities: shrinking, aging churches, declining budgets, increased suspicion of "institutions" and an unwillingness to support them.

Our conference in Alberta is the smallest of the five regional churches that will be covenanting together and proceeding into the new reality. And there is real anxiety about what this will mean for us

I think the only responsible option as delegates from our church is to vote in favour of the proposed changes. The present reality is unsustainable. We need to trust the discernment of our body of faith and trust God into the unknown.

Does it always feel good? No, not really. Will there be losses? Certainly. Will new realities require more of churches if we are to stay together? Absolutely.

But I am thankful in this circumstance.

The forms of the church have always shifted and changed. There is no one fixed church structure decreed by the New Testament. Rather, the church has always accommodated itself to the needs of the time and the place. Sometimes for good, sometimes for ill.

But no matter what structures we embrace, Christ will never stop calling communities of his followers together to worship, to pray, to teach, to eat together, to love each other, to take bread and wine and proclaim his death until he comes again.

I am thankful, in the midst of the uncertainty of church in the twenty-first century West, for local communities of Christ-followers that are still seeking to be faithful.

I give thanks for the opportunities this cultural moment provides for the church. We are no longer a "given." This gives us the chance to ask ourselves important questions in new ways.

What do we actually believe? What is the role of the church in the world? What is necessary? What can be let go?

Is our faith in a history? In “the way things have always been?” Is our faith little more than a social agenda that we tag God on to the end of?

Or is our faith, hope, and love anchored in the living God, made known in Jesus Christ?

I give thanks for the circumstances in which we, as the church, are making our way, even when they are not easy.

I hope I have been clear in each of the five cases I’ve mentioned that I am not thankful for them in and of themselves.

I am not thankful for injuries or sad stories or a declining church or global terror and chaos. I wish these things did not exist. I long for the day when Christ’s kingdom will truly come, on earth as in heaven.

Paul’s words in Thessalonians are not about trying to put a brave face on, or always looking at the bright side of life, or stubbornly pretending things are better than they are.

For Paul, a life of gratitude, joy, and prayer that *transcend* the particulars of any human life is *only* possible because of what God, in Christ, has done for the salvation of the world.

Paul’s life was hard. Read the NT some time, if you doubt it. He experienced persecution, calamity, rejection, disaster, imprisonment, flogging... the list goes on and on.

And yet, he is the one who stubbornly believed that he could do *all things*—even giving thanks in the midst of hardship—through Christ who strengthened him for the task.

Gratitude of this kind—a gratitude that transcends the particulars of human experience, a gratitude that is a settled reality even in the midst of sometimes crushing difficulty and uncertainty—is a uniquely Christian response to the world.

It’s not a useful bit of self-help advice. It’s not some practical pop-psychology.

It is a response to the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promises that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ.

It is a life lived in response to God's promise that no matter what this or that moment looks like, we are part of the big, beautiful, liberating, and hopeful story of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ Jesus.

And so, at the end of it all, we *can* be people of thanksgiving no matter what comes our way, because we have seen Jesus, our teacher, embody this kind of a life.

We can be people who cultivate lives of joy, gratitude and prayer, even the things we face don't naturally call these responses forth.

Because we are convinced that we know how this story ends, no matter how hard this or that chapter might be.

We know that nothing good is lost. We know that God holds our lives in his hands—that it is safe to let go because we have learned to trust God for what we cannot cling to.

We know that lives of deep joy and gratitude are good for us and good for the world.

So. Rejoice. Give thanks. Pray. In all circumstances.

This is the will *of* God *in* Christ Jesus, *for* you.

Amen.

