

Spiritual Practices-Having Enough-Gratitude

I Thessalonians 5: 1-2, 11-18

(October 7, 2018-Thanksgiving Sunday)

Did you catch that last verse, “In all circumstances give thanks”? Boy that’s a tough one isn’t it? All circumstances? I’m sure we can all think of times in our lives where it would have been easier for us to walk on water than to give thanks. Well that is what Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonian church, “In all circumstances give thanks.” Before you are tempted to dismiss these words as glib, trite and insensitive, know that they come from a man who knew his share of suffering, pain and heartache. Paul lived in a time where the comfortable pew did not exist, to be a follower of Jesus was a risky proposition that sometimes resulted in torture and even death. Nonetheless, there is Paul saying, “In all circumstances give thanks.”

I want you to notice the subtle but important choice of words. Paul doesn't say give thanks for all circumstances, rather, in all circumstances give thanks. It’s not “give thanks for sickness, death, divorce and disaster”, rather its “in the midst of sickness, death, divorce and disaster find a way to give thanks.” A constant theme in Paul’s letters is that worship of God is something to be done in everyday life; worship isn’t just a Sabbath activity. God is at work in the everyday. Sometimes the hard, surface realities of life, call us to a deeper faith in which we doggedly pursue the Holy in the midst of a reality seemingly barren of life.¹ That can still be excruciatingly difficult, but it’s possible. When my oldest son was diagnosed with a brain tumor I did not give thanks for the tumor and turmoil, but I found gratitude in every moment I spent with him. My gratitude was beyond expression for the skill of the surgeon, the care of the staff and the love of my family and community. Occasionally in my work, I come across people for whom death brings new life. I remember Shirley in particular. After a visit or a phone conversation, I sometimes had to remind myself that she was dying. She was so filled with gratitude, not for the cancer, but for the richness and fullness of her life and the love of family and friends. “In all circumstances give thanks,” Paul says.

If you choose only one spiritual practice to incorporate into your life my advice would be to pick gratitude. There isn’t anything I don’t think, that will ground us in the presence of God, in the sacredness of life better than a sense of gratitude. Conversely, nothing will separate us from God quicker than a lack of gratitude. Ingratitude isolates us, makes us feel alone in the world. When our lives lack gratitude everything we have, everything we are, is simply the result of our efforts. When we’re not grateful in an intentional way, we fall into the trap of taking things for granted and of feeling entitled. Although I believe it is right for us to carry a sense of entitlement about certain things, such as basic human rights, I think the key is to live with the awareness of things taken for granted. When we won't or can't see the everyday miracles that sustain our lives, the people who have helped us, the good fortune that has come our way, life feels very lonely. It feels like life all depends on our efforts. If we see the disappointments, the

¹ Abraham Smith, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians*, New Interpreter’s Bible.

heartaches and the tragedies of life as deviations from the life of ease to which we're entitled then we will live with a sense of resentment and betrayal about life.²

Letting go of entitlement is one of the lessons that the late Victor Frankl, renowned psychiatrist had to learn in order to survive life in a Nazi concentration camp. Frankl says in his memoir of the time; "We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us".³ To feel entitled to anything only sets us up for disappointment and disillusionment when life doesn't deliver. We will see life not as a gift but a cruel joke. God will be far from us, life will come to us as a trial and a conundrum, and life will be suspect, not to be trusted.

The practice of gratitude is an antidote to this disappointment and disillusionment, to isolation and loneliness, to a lack of faith and meaning. There are some simple things any of us can do. These aren't exhaustive by any means, more of a start on the road to gratitude. Begin each day in gratitude with a prayer of thanks for the day that has come and that will be. Give thanks for your bed and your home, for the dark of night and the light of day, for the miracle of your lungs and your heart, for life-sustaining oxygen, for the water that will wake you. Just begin, let the prayer of gratitude lead you where you need to go. End each day in gratitude for all that has been. Review the day, bring into your heart and mind those things for which you are easily grateful. But, also consider the difficulties, the heartache and the suffering, can you find a grain of gratitude in those circumstances? Finally, as you surrender into sleep release the day's events into God's care.⁴ Throughout the day, pick a cue that will prompt you to give thanks. Every time you pick up a utensil, give thanks for food. Every medical appointment give thanks for healers and healing. Whenever you walk into your home, give thanks for shelter. Whenever you turn on a tap, give thanks for water. Pick one cue per day and work with that—see what difference it makes.⁵ Make a habit of asking yourself these three questions from time to time—For what am I surprisingly grateful? What am I taking for granted right now? What do I have enough of or an abundance of in my life?

Author and academic researcher on vulnerability, Brene Brown says, "What's obvious is what's God in what's beautiful. What's more meaningful is God in what's broken, what's hurting, what's lonely, what's scared."⁶ The grace of gratitude is that it can transform our lives even when our external circumstances don't change. In gratitude, we no longer see ourselves as the product of our labors or victims of the whims of life, rather we see ourselves as the recipients of gifts, in church language, we say recipients of

² As an aside, I think that's one of the reasons why grief is so difficult, because gratitude is so difficult in the midst of Grief. The thing that can connect us to others, to God, to the sacredness of life becomes almost impossible in the midst of grief's suffering.

³ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 98.

⁴ Mary-Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, pp. 145-148.

⁵ Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat,

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/practices.php?id=11&g=5>

⁶ Brene Brown, Video—*Desperate Need*, downloaded from Work of the People subscription service (<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/desperate-need>)

Grace. We are not alone; we are here because of the everyday miracles of the universe, of our star the sun, the earth, water, oxygen. Our lives are built on the foundations of those who have gone before us and passed on skills, values, and love. There are moments of serendipity in life, when the right person, the right book, the right lesson comes into your life at the right time. We learn to accept life on its own terms and to see in it the possibility for growth, depth, redemption and salvation. Life becomes a gift and the source of gifts.

Gratitude connects us, brings us closer to God because we learn to see ourselves as one strand in the web of creation, not as the creator, we see ourselves as part of something magnificent and beautiful. In all circumstances give thanks. Why? Because when you wander far into the land of self-sufficiency, hard work or perhaps grief and disillusionment, gratitude will bring you home to a land of grace, community, love and acceptance. The life of scarcity, of not having enough will be transformed into a life of abundance, where there is enough of everything we need to live the life God has given us. Amen.

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