

## “The Perfect Time for Giving Thanks”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

11-15-20 Consecration Sunday

Based upon Dan. 6:1-9; 1 Thess. 5:16-18

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” Paul advised the Thessalonians. Today is Consecration Sunday, a day in the life of this church that traditionally has been set aside for giving thanks to God for all of our abundant blessings, and for showing our gratitude by committing to share some of them with others through the ministries of the Church. In past years, we have had so much for which to give thanks. We have thanked God for our health and homes and families, for the community of faith and all it has done in God’s name. We have looked back on the year and thought, “Wow, what a great year! Thank you!” But this year, 2020, has broken records for being one of the worst years ever in recorded history for many people. One and a quarter million people around the globe have died from COVID-19, and another 5 million are currently fighting it. The economy is struggling, as are the many who are out of work. Neither the election nor our political divisions seem like they will ever end, normal schooling continues to remain elusive, and many of the practices of normal life that had resumed may soon be taken away again, including watching and playing sports, going to restaurants, and traveling. Even the holidays created to celebrate Thanksgiving and love are also on the chopping block. You know the list as well as I, so I don’t want to belabor it and depress you on today of all days. But let’s just say that right now, what I hear people giving thanks for the most is the fact that the end of 2020 is in sight. Next year has got to be better than this one, right? It’s hard to imagine that it could be worse.

“Give thanks in *all* circumstances,” Paul told the Thessalonians. Does God really expect us to give thanks for all the horrible things in our lives, to say, “Thanks so much for the fact that we are out of work or almost out of savings, sick, or living like prisoners in our own homes?” No. There is good news to be found in this verse, and it’s all captured in the preposition. “Give thanks *in* all circumstances,” Paul wrote, not “*for* all circumstances.” Paul wouldn’t expect the folks in Louisiana, Colorado, or the Philippines to give thanks *for* the destruction of their homes, or those who have lost loved ones to give thanks for their deaths. He wasn’t that callous in his faith. But Paul had learned something through all the difficult circumstances of his own life that he wanted to share with the Thessalonians, and that is that you don’t need positive circumstances in order to give thanks or to experience God’s grace, all you need is God in your life. Paul had that, and therefore had discovered that he was genuinely thankful when his words were successful in conveying the Gospel, and when they were rejected, when he was locked up and beaten, and when he was healthy and admired. He gave thanks often, so often in *1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians* in fact, that commentators don’t really know what to do with all the thanksgiving in this letter. Paul just keeps on praying and thanking his way through the whole thing.

Centuries before, Daniel, one of the main characters in the apocalyptic text by the same name, lived a similar way, even though he was living in exile in Persia (which had formerly been Babylonia). He and the other Jews had lost everything— their homes, their nation, their sense of special identity, even in the eyes of some, their God. The Temple, God’s house in Jerusalem, was destroyed, and with it so many dreams. Decades went by with no relief from their circumstances,

yet according to the story, Daniel did not give up when this happened. He tried to make the best of his situation, and did so well that the king, Darius, was going to give him a high government position in the kingdom. But then the others regional leaders got jealous of him. They persuaded Darius, who in this story is not terribly bright and easily manipulated, that he should pass a decree that if anyone prayed to anything or anyone other than himself for thirty days, that person would be thrown to the lions. Daniel's enemies knew something about him that we don't find out until verse 10, which is that Daniel was a man of deep faith. Whereas many in that situation might stop praying in a visible way at least, in order to save their lives, the evil satraps knew that Daniel wouldn't do that, and they were right. According to verse 10, even though Daniel knew about the decree, he went on praying and praising God three times a day right in front of a window where everyone could see him. He faced Jerusalem just to make it clear he wasn't praying to Darius. That was all the evidence the satraps needed. They caught Daniel in the act, and if we had read further, we would have seen them rejoice when he faced the consequence: being thrown into a den of hungry lions.

This story is a legend, part of a text that was written during a later time of persecution in Jewish history in order to help the people remain faithful. Still, I can't help wondering in the context of the story what Daniel was praising God for in his prayers. It's easy to understand his desire to pray for help, but his offering praise is less obvious. What would you give thanks for in those circumstances? Would you focus on what you still had— your life, a dry bed, a chance to work, a window— or would you focus on what you lost? Would your prayers be primarily grounded in complaining or in expressing gratitude?

There is a human tendency to give thanks when things are good and to complain when things are bad. But according to psychologists, we would all be happier if we changed this pattern. Professor Laurie Santos, who teaches the most popular psyche class at Yale and has made a career out of studying happiness, has demonstrated objectively that for most people happiness does not come from changing our circumstances. We all think that it will. Human intuition tells us that if we could just get rid of what makes us miserable in our lives, we would be happy. But with a few exceptions grounded in extreme cases of escaping acute suffering, the actual data indicates that happiness comes from within not without. It comes from our deliberately changing our perspective and reaction to our surrounding circumstances. One of the best and most efficient ways to do this is to focus intentionally on expressing gratitude rather than complaining. Thankfulness resets the brain and the heart for contentment.<sup>1</sup>

There's a saying you've probably heard me mention sometime before— I don't know who started it originally, but it has haunted me since I first read it. "What if, when you woke up today, all you had was what you gave thanks for yesterday?" It's meant to be a thought experiment of sorts, a motivator to prompt more gratitude. But when you think about it, in some ways this year, an aspect of this saying has come true. This year we have lost, God-willing temporarily, many of the things that failed to give thanks for each day, things that we simply took for granted. In the "before times," we went to our offices and sent our kids to school; we shopped and dined and went to soccer games and concerts. Now that we can't do those things in the same way, it is easy

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<sup>1</sup> Alda, Alan. "What makes you happy? An interview with Laurie Santos." Clear + Vivid Podcast, Oct. 26, 2020 11:30 p.m. <https://omny.fm/shows/clear-vivid-with-alan-alda/what-makes-you-happy>.

to see how we failed to appreciate them adequately when we could. Before the pandemic did you ever thank God for the times you could banter with colleagues at work about the game over coffee or for the fact that you didn't have to buy your own office supplies? Did you thank you God for being able to drop off your child at school, where he or she could do hands-on learning with an in-person teacher all day, and hang out with friends, kick a ball around on recess, or share the latest goofy memes? How many of us thanked God daily for being able to touch our faces without fear, or hug our friends, or be with family indoors without wearing masks or worrying about inadvertently endangering the ones we love? How many of us thanked God each day for being able to leave our homes whenever we felt like it, or to visit people in the hospital or nursing homes when they were sick? Very few I suspect. I know I didn't.

We can continue to rage about or grieve the absence of these things, or we can learn from them. If we use these moments of missing the before times as teaching moments, then boy do we have a lot for which to give thanks that we didn't give thanks for routinely. We need to give thanks for people who work in meat packing plants and grocery stores, and for truck drivers and delivery people. We should be thanking God for doctors and nurses and EMTs, readily available medicines, tests, and vaccines. Our hearts should be bursting with thank you's for having jobs, and for the times we could take trips to see new things, and for the times we experienced silence and solitude or company and parties. Just because we don't have all these things now doesn't mean we shouldn't give thanks for them. Now is the best time to give thanks for them, because now we have realized what blessings they were.

When Paul told the Thessalonians to give thanks in all circumstances, the word he used in Greek for "give thanks" was *eucharisteo*. You might recognize the root in that word because it is also in one of the names for the Lord's Supper—the Eucharist, or Thanksgiving. But the verb itself is interesting when you take it apart. "*Charis*" means grace and implies something given. So literally the verb to "give thanks" is "to see the grace in something," or "to see something as the gift that it is." I think that's why we call the prayers before meals "saying grace." When we "say grace" it's almost like playing eye-spy. In the moment we offer a prayer of thanksgiving for a meal or fellowship at the table, we are saying we can see the grace in those things. But Paul's point was that we shouldn't limited this game of eye-spy to mealtimes or happy times. We should look for the grace in all times because it will always be there through Jesus Christ. Even when it seems like much or all is lost, it's there. That, I believe is one reason why it is Christ's will that we give thanks— not just because it's the polite thing to do when someone gives you something to express gratitude, but also because the act of doing so, the act of *eucharisteo*, opens our eyes to the sustaining presence of God which is with us at all times and in all circumstances.

Where can you spy the grace in your current life? Where do you now recognize that you had it in the things and practices you once had that you hope you will have again? Give thanks for all the moments that you were free and felt safe, whether you have them now or not. Give thanks for all the moments you had a window, and a dry bed, and work to do. Give thanks for times you could shake hands, sing with others, and go to the movies. Give thanks for the technology that we have now to keep us connected until we can meet in person, and for teachers and doctors and ballot counters and mail carriers. We have so much to be grateful for because we have been showered in so much grace.

I hope as you are taking stock of your gifts that you will count this church among them. And I hope that even though you could just as well stick your pledge card in the mail and we would get it eventually, if you are able-bodied and live nearby that you will take the time to get in your car and drive it to the church because this moment is a gift too, a chance to thank God publicly for Prince of Peace. Even in our cars with masks on, getting to line up together to pledge our commitment to Christ through the Church is also a chance for us to see that we are in this together– which we are. It is a chance to say, “I spy Clive!” or “I spy Lynn!” “Look there’s Ellen, Ian, or George! This is my church family, the people who will love me and stand by me in all circumstances. Grace is all around me. I am richly blessed!”

Fred Buechner once wrote, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”<sup>2</sup> Thanks be to God for gift of grace that is life, and for the moments good and bad that remind us of that gift every day! May we never take for granted all that God is and has done for us, and never stop giving thanks, for that is the will of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Curry, Michael, Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times (New York: Avery, 2020), 1 (citing Buechner’s book, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*).