

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

November 22, 2009

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

Christ the King Sunday

Isaiah 51:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

In an old Beetle Bailey comic strip, the soldiers are grumbling as they pass through the chow line. Wearing his smudged apron and holding a spoonful of glop ready to serve, Cookie asks, “Why can’t you guys be more like the chaplain? He always can find something to be thankful for.”

The next frame pictures the chaplain seated at a table with his meal before him. His eyes are closed, and his hands are folded in prayer. The caption above him reads, “O Lord, thank you for the ketchup today.”

What difference might it make for our lives to adopt an attitude of gratitude? A prayer of thanks may be pleasing to God, but more importantly, it has the potential to change us.

In a former church, a school teacher and member of the congregation came to me quite excitedly one day. She said that she had decided to make a change in her daily routine.

“I’ve always been an avid newspaper reader,” she said. “My husband goes out early every morning, and he would deliver the newspaper right to my bed. It’s

the first thing I saw every morning. I'd read the paper, and I found that I was starting each day completely depressed. All of the problems of the world were on my shoulders before I could even get out of bed. So, last week, I asked my husband not to bring me the paper until I've made it to the breakfast table. I've started to use those few minutes before I get up praying rather than reading. The first thing I do is to thank God for the new day. Now I find that I'm ready for it. I'm not depressed as I was before. I've not solved any of the world's problems, but I now have energy to face at least one or two of them."

It was a simple change in her life, but it had deep consequences for her. This may be something you do already, every day. Start the day with a prayer. Offer thanks, first thing.

I want to assure you that such an exercise is not simply about 'looking on the bright side of life.' Rather, it is looking at all of life as it really is, a gift from God.

I am going to be the first to admit that I am not very good at offering thanks. It's something I want to improve upon. I want to be more like those people who always seem to say the right words of gratitude. In churches, in schools, in businesses, they have a ready compliment and kind words and thanks for all of the other people who've been doing good work, no matter how small their contribution, no matter how likely that someone else would overlook it. But, they have not overlooked it, and that, I believe, is a first step in developing the habits of

appreciation and living a life of thankfulness: looking and not overlooking, seeing and not missing, paying attention and not failing to notice what is right before our eyes.

Gratitude always involves paying attention. It is seeing what is there. None of us can offer thanks for something we cannot perceive. And, truly, there are lots of invisible people and things all around us. We don't see the effort that has gone into providing many things that add to our lives each day. We don't notice the people who serve our needs. We don't appreciate the loveliness of the world around us when we are moving too fast ever to notice it.

Slowing down is another requirement for offering thanks, and that is not an easy thing to do. We're not born doing it. We are not encouraged in such a discipline by the culture around us. We have to be trained for it, and then practice gratitude in each day.

I can think of so many things that I take for granted. The clothes that I wear. What materials went into them? Did they come from a sheep or a cotton plant? Who took the material and made it into fabric? Who took the cloth and sewed it into clothing? What about the food I eat. Where did it come from? Who planted it, picked it, transported and cooked it? You may not think it's true, but I believe that when we come to a deeper appreciation of such things, we can enjoy our clothing more and the food tastes better.

I know that a few of you like to grow some vegetables in your back yard. I've done a bit of that myself over the years. In a good year, most backyard gardeners have something to give away. I've noticed that people who have grown vegetables themselves are much more appreciative of a gift of fresh vegetables. They are aware of the care that went into bringing forth such produce. They know to stop and look at what has been given to them, to appreciate its appearance, know by touch whether it is ready to eat, enjoy its smell, and savor its taste. "Wow, what a great looking tomato," they might say with a genuine sincerity. When we stop to consider how interesting and varied are the many things we eat and wear, use and occupy, day to day, we naturally respond in gratitude, but if we fail ever to see them, we cannot offer thanks for them.

It's also unlikely that we would ever offer thanks for something we think we are owed, or something we believe we deserve. If I purchase a box of cereal from the grocery store, it's not likely that I will send a 'thank you' note to the manufacturer. "Thank you Quaker Oats for that great box of cereal I enjoyed last week." It's a business transaction, pure and simple. I get my cereal from them, and they get their money from me. What's to be thankful for?

Unfortunately, a sense of entitlement can infect many areas of our life. I am special. I deserve the nice meal my spouse has cooked; why should I be thankful for it? I've worked hard. I've earned my good job. Why should I thank my teachers

who prepared me for it, my co-workers who've supported me, or the mentor who helped me get where I am today? I take care of my body, and I should be in good health. Why should I be grateful to my parents who got me off to a good start? Why should I thank God for the blessing of being healthy and whole?

The Apostle Paul writes, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." There is a connection between rejoicing and thanking. As we are learning to rejoice, we are also learning to thank. As we practice thanksgiving, it gives us joy and those around us, too.

In our nation's calendar, we celebrate Thanksgiving this week. No matter how much that story of the original Thanksgiving has been wrapped in legend, at its core were a people who were deeply committed to God. They were not perfect men and women, but they knew that the good they experienced, and even the hardships they endured, were gifts deserving of thanks.

That's the hardest edge of Paul's instruction. "Give thanks in **all** circumstances." Not just when things are going well. Not just when everything is working our way. But even when there is trouble, when we've endured a set back. When we've been hurt. To find in those moments something to be grateful for and to lift that up. That may be a large challenge, but it is one worth pursuing, to find the smallest joy in a time of struggle can be a great blessing.

But, also there is the hope that someday, somehow we will be able to offer thanks for the very thing which has caused the struggle. I say this not to diminish the impact of the grave suffering that we may endure. But there are times—I have experienced them, and I have heard of them, too—when we are able to give thanks for life’s harder lessons. “I lost my job, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me.” I’ve heard people say that.

“I was sick, terribly ill, but that time I spent in bed, it changed me, gave me new insight. I’m a different person now. I am now grateful for that time.” I’ve heard that too. Surely, you have heard similar testimonies, too. Maybe you have them too.

I’d like to end with two things today. First of all a prayer. It’s quite a famous prayer though we do not know who composed it. It was discovered on a Civil War battlefield, written by a fallen Confederate soldier.

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men [and women],
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for things, that I might enjoy life,
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for—but everything I hoped for.
And despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among all [people], most richly blessed.*

Paul says to give thanks in all circumstances. I would like for us all to be able to do that today. To give thanks. To stop and look, to consider what our lives are made of. To acknowledge that our lives would be so much poorer without the other people who've helped us along the way, without the things which nourish us and protect us. Without the God who protects us. Let's give thanks.

That is why I've had some colored cards placed in your bulletin today. I hope you still have yours. I'd like you to take out that card, and on the front of the card write the name of a person that you would like to thank. This might be someone you see every day; it might be someone you haven't seen for thirty years. But I'd like you to give it a little thought, if there's someone in your life that needs a note of thanks. I'd like you to write on the other side of that card, at least begin, a note of thanks to them. I'm going to give you a minute or two to think about this, but also at the conclusion of that time, I'm going to ask you to share with someone close to you who you've written the note to, and why. Let's practice a little bit of thanksgiving here among us. Go ahead and write on your cards.

Now that you've written on your cards, and shared with your neighbor, let us pray:

Dearest God, we do thank you for this day, and we thank you especially for the people we have named on the cards we have written, for the difference they

have made in our lives. And may we follow their example and make a difference for others as we seek to follow you and honor you.

In Christ Jesus. Amen.