

## Giving Thanks in the Worst Year of the 21st Century

Psalm 100 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Thanksgiving is the one time when families that never give a thought to saying grace at the table on the other 364 days of the year, will expect it to happen over this meal. They will insist on not carving the turkey or doling out the cranberry sauce, until someone has given thanks.

One Thanksgiving a family was seated at their table, which was laden with turkey and all the fixings. Before digging in, they went around the table, giving every guest a chance to express their gratitude for something. They proceeded in order of speakers from the oldest to the youngest. When it came to the youngest in the family, he gave thanks for the turkey. Everyone reached for their knives and forks, ready to dig in at last. But the young man was just getting warmed up. He thanked his mother for cooking the turkey and his father for buying the turkey. After a brief pause, he launched into a litany of thanksgivings that included just about anyone who had anything to do with the turkey's journey from the farm to his plate. He said, "I thank the clerk at the grocery store who scanned the turkey and the bagger who bagged it. I thank the grocery store people who put it on display where we could find it. I thank those who transported the turkey to the store. I thank the farmer who raised it. I thank the man who sold the farmer the feed." At last, he paused, as if he had finally exhausted every imaginable cause for gratitude. His older brother, thinking that he was finished and they all would finally get to actually taste the turkey, muttered, "Thank God!" The younger brother glanced at him and said with some annoyance, "Ahhh, I was just about to get to Him."

Maybe this young fellow had heard about Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian congregation of Christians; the part where he advised them to "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in *all* circumstances." Sometimes, everywhere you look, there are things that deserve to be rejoiced over and circumstances worth feeling thankful for, like good health, prosperity and family.

Other times, it's 2020. If 2020 was an ice cream truck, the only flavor it offered would be Liver and Onions. If 2020 was a scented candle, the fragrance would be "Dumpster Fire." What about this year calls for rejoicing? An unending series of massive wildfires? Or a parade of hurricanes long enough to have blown through the whole English alphabet and still working its way through the Greek alphabet? What did 2020 give us that we should be thankful about? The relentless progression of COVID? Or, what about the seemingly unresolvable political divisions pitting Americans against each other? Maybe even bitter divisions among those who will be seated at the same Thanksgiving tables this week. Surely, 2020 is an exception to Paul's rule about giving thanks in ALL circumstances, if there ever was one! Paul though, didn't say anything about exceptions. All, meant all.

Here's what we get wrong though, about Paul's message. Paul wasn't saying that tragedies and tribulations were something to be grateful for, in and of themselves. What he intended for us to understand is that thankfulness is not governed by circumstances. Thankfulness is not a reaction to events around us. It is a response to the presence of God within us; a presence that cannot be nullified by any external situations we may face. Thanksgiving is most profound when it reflects the faith that our relationship with God is the determiner or the quality of our life, not outside events. We normally judge life by our visible, surface realities. We measure life's quality solely by the ratio of good or bad things that happen to us. When that ratio fails to add up favorably, it would seem that *any* expression of gratitude would amount to a denial of the impact of our undeniably bad circumstances. The only way to

sincerely rejoice and give thanks during a year like this is to shift our focus from the grim events outside us to the peaceful presence within us.

Rejoicing always and giving thanks in all circumstances comes from living, not on the surface of life only, but in the depths of life where we are united with God. It is in that depth of living that we understand something Paul would say elsewhere, which is that “we are more than conquerors through God who loves us.” How do we live life from those depths of life while the storms rage around us? The answer is found in between the instructions to rejoice always and give thanks in every circumstance. And it is to pray without ceasing. In other words, that we consciously anchor ourselves in our relationship with God. Then we can rejoice always and not only when things go our way, but even when they don't, because our joy is grounded in the reality of God and the faith that nothing can separate us from God's love and care for us. Then we can give thanks in all circumstances, not being thankful for the bad circumstances themselves, but thankful for God's presence with us in the storm.

To pray without ceasing does not necessarily mean reciting prayers in our heads 24/7. It can mean working on our relationship with God without being distracted by other things. It means that our connection to God is not something limited to certain designated times and places; in church buildings or even virtual worship services. But that God is present and available to us unceasingly, if we are willingly to focus ourselves on that presence. As the 100th Psalm reminds us, the keys that open the gates to thanksgiving are found in knowing that the *Lord* is God, and not the forces with which we contend. It is God that made us, and we are God's; we are God's people, and the sheep of God's pasture.

Actually, those Pilgrims whose first Thanksgiving celebration we remember this week, have left us a good illustration of what it means to rejoice and be thankful in a bad year. Their experience during that winter of 1620 was, relatively speaking, as grim as 2020 has been for us. It being too late to plant crops when they landed in November and their supplies left over from the voyage being nearly exhausted, half of the original 102 Mayflower passengers died of starvation, malnutrition or sicknesses such as scurvy during the first, horrible, New England winter. There were 17 fatalities in the short month of February alone. Frequently two or three died on the same day. Among the casualties were 18 of the 30 women of childbearing age. When they finally had gathered in a harvest, and held what we would call the original Thanksgiving feast, the Plymouth Pilgrims were simply celebrating their survival of that first awful season. That and the faith that despite all the losses and suffering, their awareness of God's presence and God's purpose for them remained intact.

Like the boy who delayed the start of Thanksgiving dinner with his long list of things to be grateful for, what it all comes down to is being grateful not only for good *things*, but the goodness of knowing that we are beloved of God; and that the worst events of life do not erase that reality or signify that God has abandoned us. Which is something that even 2020 cannot take away from us.

So, on Thanksgiving and every day, wherever and with whomever you celebrate the blessings in your life, may your lists be long and your gratitude plenteous. But, don't limit yourself to giving thanks for the good things you can see, taste and touch. Because all those things, as much as they may delight us, are really signs pointing beyond themselves to something greater. And that something greater is God's grace, mercy and love for you. Let your thanksgivings be not only for the gifts — but most importantly, for the Giver. In doing that, you will do more than “say grace.” You will radiate grace. Even in the worst year of the 21st century. Copyright 2020 Raymond Medeiros