

Thanks In All Circumstances

August 27, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Ephesians 5: 18-19, Thessalonians 5 : 12-13, 16-18, Colossians 1:3-6, 11-12; 3: 16-17

It's been quite a week already, full of grief and gratitude on the personal front and here at church. And yet, on Friday, my wife Nancy shouted out an especially giddy "Oh My God!" from her home office! She had just opened a surprise email from her work saying she had won two tickets to last night's Bruce Springsteen concert at Gillette! Lucky her, right? Lucky me! Lucky, us! And to make it even better, yesterday happened to be our 17th anniversary. We both are from New Jersey, as is Springsteen (in case you didn't know). Neither of us had ever seen the Boss before so we went for it, and suffice it to say, we had a blast. For Nancy, it was just five days after losing her mom. She needed the boost! For me, just a few days before saying goodbye to my dear colleague Lexi. I needed the boost too! Not the same kind of loss here, I know, but I mention it only because it illustrates the ways we humans have a remarkable capacity to feel many things at once, and sometimes - times like this morning - we need the reminder that it's ok to laugh *and* cry, to feel sadness *and* gladness, to be in touch with the depth of our grief *and* the height our gratitude, and we can do all of it at the same time! In fact, I'd recommend it, and, so it seems, Paul does too!

Did you catch the theme of our little epistle medley that Lexi just read? From Thessalonians; "be filled with the Spirit, 20 *giving thanks to God ...* at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. From Ephesians, "rejoice always, pray continually, *give thanks in all circumstances.*" From Colossians, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], And whatever you do, do everything, giving thanks to God through Christ."

Yes, the theme is gratitude! And yet do you also see a pattern here in how Paul talks about giving thanks? For him, it's not gratitude only some of the time. It's not giving thanks only when things are going your way. It's gratitude at *all* times, in *all* circumstances, in *everything* you do! This is a key concern throughout his writings.

Let's take a closer look at Colossians. In his letter to the church leaders, he says "In our prayers for you, we *always* give thanks for you to God" for we have heard of your faith in Christ, your love for all the saints, and your hope for the future. Paul's next step is to recognize the spiritual growth that is happening among them. He references the image of a tree bearing fruit, as Jesus did when he was talking about those great vines of discipleship in John's gospel. The knowledge of God is growing in them! While so much of our growth is invisible to our naked eye, Paul sees it in them and reminds them and us that we are constantly being reshaped, renewed, and reformed into more fully human beings as we grow into what he calls "the fullness of Christ." And, finally, Paul adds to these first verses a prayer for strength. "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, *while joyfully giving* thanks yourselves." Even in his thanking God for them, he circles back to implore them to give thanks for God, who has enabled "their share in the inheritance of the saints." Clearly, this is more than some perfunctory thank you note that Paul's mom taught him to write whenever anyone did right by him. Paul lifts up a practice of

gratitude as part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. What's more, check this out, the Greek word for power in this sentence, where he says, "may you have all the strength that comes from the power of God, so that you can endure and give thanks" - the Greek word here is *dynamis* from which we get our word "dynamite." May you be made strong with the dynamite of God! Paul is inviting his reader here to tap into some potent, lasting, impactful stuff, and it's just that "dynamis" or power of God that propels our gratitude at every turn. With that strength of God and faith in God, we can begin to consider and see how we endure those both/and times where we are giving thanks in all circumstances, times where we are invited to feel grief and gratitude, both anger and gratitude, anxiety and gratitude, disappointment and gratitude!

Do we see how Paul is not recommending a choice here, as if gratitude is a tool we might choose to use at specific moments? Instead for Paul, gratitude is a constant, all-the-time posture of genuine faith, like a thrumming bass line under or an enchanting descant that keeps us singing above our lamentations! It reminds me of a dear Franciscan monk friend of mine, Brother Jack Ratcheschmidt, who I'd circle up with year after year, after countless Greater Boston Interfaith Organizations meetings and actions. In GBIO, it was our custom then as now to end whatever gathering of leaders with an evaluation. At least for starters, we'd always go around the room and get one-word gut-check from everyone on how they were honestly feeling in that moment. We'd hear it all - exhausted, exhilarated, angry, disappointed, pumped, you name it, but Brother Jack, no matter what had just happened, his one word was always the same. He was grateful!

The writer David Whyte puts it this way: "Gratitude is not a passive response to something we have been given. Gratitude arises from paying attention, from being awake in the presence of everything that is alive within and without us. Gratitude is not necessarily something that is shown after [an] event, [instead], it is the deep *a priori* state of attention that shows we understand and are equal to the gifted nature of life."

I think this is the kind of gratitude Paul was interested in cultivating in those early Christian communities and it's the kind we still need today, especially on a day like this one, as we draw to an end a robust and blessed five-year connection with a remarkable minister who has led and guided us through Covid and beyond!

In this regard, Lexi, thank you only begins to say it! Yes, I and we are exceedingly grateful *for* all the gifts of your ministry you have shared with us during these last five years. This is an appropriate response, and there is surely something unavoidably "transactional" at moments like these, which is why we have gifts *for* you that we will give you shortly! Yet, more deeply, here and now, today, as we honor your ministry, and this time of transition in your life and ours, I pray that our gratitude arises from a deeper place, and not merely as a response to the wondrous event of your ministry here! I hope today draws us all back to this deeper, all-the-time spiritual practice of gratitude, to that sense of ongoing awakening and witnessing, to your whole-hearted fully embodied presence, and to ours, including everything that that our hearts may be experiencing right now - the grief, the joy, the fear of what we will do without you - a witnessing and noticing that it's *all a gift!* Because as you've been keen to remind us repeatedly, that's how God made us - as beloved gifts, each and every one of us. You are a gift and we are a gift and all of life is a gift. The beauty and gratitude arise from within when we take time to notice and pay attention to it all together and say thank you! Thank you, God! Because of your faith, because of that strength and dynamite of God, that you have tapped into repeatedly, you have beautifully modeled this practice for us all.

Friends, just think back with me to the pain, loneliness, grief, and anxiety we were all feeling at the height of Covid, when Lexi would zoom a prayer or new spiritual practice to us, or faithfully and unflappably lead us from this empty sanctuary to your screen, from her most authentic self to yours, for 18 months and beyond! What a gift indeed to be reminded through and by her of that glorious, sustaining power of God, and to give thanks through it all, for each other and God. Those weren't mere transactions of someone doing her job like the Boss and Rockstar minister and colleague that Lexi surely is! That was her cultivating that deep state of attention that showed us all how to understand the gifted nature of life itself, and that we are somehow equal to it because each of us is a beloved part of it. And how much more do we need to remember this ongoing practice and posture not only today but as we head into another fall, into our respective next steps, and yes, into another what is sure to be a wild election year, and further into our climate crisis?

So yes, by all means, notice and feel all the feels! Today, by all means, let gratitude and this deep noticing arise in all circumstances, no matter how sad, hard, or scary! Gratitude and grief! Gratitude and worry! Gratitude and profound hope for what comes next all rooted and growing in that strength of God Talk about dynamite! It's at once as explosive and contained as the energy of a rock'n'roll concert for 50,000 fans a Gillette, as poignant and powerful as the shared silence and tears at a loved one's deathbed, or even at a beloved pastor's farewell. Lexi, may you and we continue to be made strong and lead from this strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you and we continue to be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully **12** giving thanks to [God], who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints, an inheritance of the beloved gifted nature of life!

First Church, we get a lot of practice living in this college town, at comings and goings, at hellos and goodbyes. Some of you are experiencing this now in your own ways. And, like it or not, we here are something of a launch pad for ministers who are with us for a time before taking off to a bright future elsewhere, and its time again to let the countdown begin. To set the platform, let's practice this gratitude in all circumstance right now, y'all! Tap in and feel all the feels that are on your heart, turn to a neighbor, say: "I give God thanks God for you!" and receive that too! Turn to your other neighbor and say, "I give God thanks for you!" Now everyone, turn towards Lexi, even if it's your first time here, and say "We give God thanks for you, Lexi!" This feels good and right, not only to say it but to hear it as well, for we are all gifts, all part of that gifted nature of life itself, and it's ours let gratitude arise, at all times, in everything we do. Once more, let's say it all together. Thanks be to God! **Thanks be to God!** Amen.