

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 24, 2019

“Thanksgiving Is a Choice.”

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

It was a few weeks after the birthday celebration and the mother constantly had been after her twelve-year-old daughter to write “thank you” notes. The relationship between them had become strained when the girl finally sat down to do her duty. Her first note was to her aunt who lived out of state. The aunt had sent her a pin cushion, a lovely gift, but not on the request list of many twelve-year-olds. The note was brief. She wrote: “Dear aunt Mae, thank you for the pin cushion. It’s just what I always wanted—but not very much.”

I suppose the moral of the story is that you can make someone write a “thank you” note. But you can’t make them be really thankful. It won’t be long before we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. By Presidential proclamation, it will be a day set aside for giving thanks. A President can declare the holiday, but he cannot command gratitude. So, on that day, almost everyone will have a holiday, but not everyone will celebrate Thanksgiving. Probably most will not. But those who do, will do so as a result of a decision. Because, finally, thanksgiving is a choice we make. And that choice has far more to do with the reality inside of us than with the reality around us.

Circumstances do not produce gratitude. They just don’t. You know people, as I do, who live in very favorable circumstances, but they are not thankful. Instead, they spend their lives complaining that the good is not better. At the same time, we all know people who have experienced problem after problem, yet they live in everlasting gratitude for the blessings they have received. And they joyfully and expectantly await further expressions of God’s love. No, you cannot explain either the presence or absence of gratitude by looking only at circumstances. Gratitude has far more to do with the inside than the outside.

Take the Apostle Paul, for example. His was not an easy life. He had been criticized, betrayed, attacked, beaten, stoned, imprisoned, shipwrecked. His “thorn in the flesh” tormented him. And his enemies were such that he lived continually under the threat of death. If you were looking for external circumstances likely to produce gratitude, you would not choose the circumstances of Paul. And yet, his letters are filled with joy and thanksgiving. Again, and again he says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” “Thanks be to God.” And as he wrote to the Thessalonians: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” From all appearances, his gratitude was in spite of rather than because of his circumstances. But there was something on the inside of him that prompted gratitude.

Of course, we are to give thanks for our obvious blessings. But, according to Paul, our thanksgiving need not be dependent upon our circumstances. He says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” He is saying that we can decide to give thanks even when in oppressive conditions.

That is exactly what the first celebrants of Thanksgiving did. You know what a rough time they had. A storm at sea blew them off course and they came to the wrong destination. Because of that, the winter was far more severe than they had anticipated. The average food ration got down to five grains of corn per person per day. They began with 102 people in their little colony. Only 50 survived that first winter. Then, they had a choice to make. Either they could gather in bitterness and mourn the tragic reality that half of their number had died, or, they could come together in thanksgiving and celebrate the fact that half of them had survived. You know what they chose. And that choice was made not because of something outside of them, but because of something deep within them. They looked for blessings!

That’s the choice that comes to every person. What do you look for in life? Do you recognize blessings when you see them? Do you believe that every good thing in life comes as a gift from God? Do you see the glass half empty or half full? Do you look for and dwell on the deprivations of life, or the blessings of life? If you don’t have the right stuff on the inside, you won’t be able to see it on the outside.

There is a story that I heard in seminary years ago. Parents had twin sons who were very different. One was a confirmed pessimist, the other an incurable optimist. The parents worried that each had a distorted view of life. They went to a counselor for help. He said, “I think they can be helped, but the treatment is radical. Christmas will soon be here. On Christmas morning you must provide the best gifts imaginable for the little pessimist. He will have to feel good about it, and he will be cured. But, for the optimist, you must give only a room full of manure. He will not be able to see anything good in that, and he will be cured.” So, that’s what they did. On Christmas morning, the pessimist looked at his sumptuous gifts and began to whine: “I don’t like this. This isn’t the right color. This is not what I wanted.” But in the other room the optimist was cheering with joy, throwing manure up in the air shouting, “You can’t fool me. You can’t fool me. With all this manure, there has to be a pony in here somewhere.”

Is there any doubt in your mind as to which of the two boys will have the happiest, the most fulfilling life? If you constantly expect the worst, you cannot live the best. You just can't!

Write this down somewhere so you won't forget it, because I'm about to say something important: What you look for in life, you tend to find. We tend not to notice things we are not looking for. We pass by blessings every day. Even when they are there, we don't see them because our attention is somewhere else. At the same time, we exaggerate our problems and complicate them if we go out looking for them. We sometimes even see problems when they aren't there, if that's what we are looking for. Self-fulfilling prophecy! I remember an epitaph a pessimist wrote for his own gravestone. He wrote: "I expected this, and here I am!" It's true. We tend to find what we look for. And our looking for it helps to create it.

I remember a pastor friend telling the story of a family moving from one town to another in the horse and buggy days. They loaded all their possessions onto a wagon and started out. When they came to the outskirts of the new town, they saw one of the locals sitting on a bench whittling, chewing, and spitting. They pulled their wagon to a stop and called out to the man. "Tell us what kind of people live in this town?" The man sitting on the bench had a remarkable kind of folk wisdom. Instead of answering the question directly, he asked another question in return. He asked, "What kind of people live in the town you just left?" "Oh," said the man in the wagon, "they were cold, self-centered, un-neighborly." "Well," said the local man, continuing his whittling, chewing and spitting, "I imagine you'll find these people to be pretty much the same." The next day another family came to town and found the same local man sitting on the bench. They asked the same question with the same response, "What kind of people live in the town you just left?" They replied, "They were warm people, friendly people, helpful in every way." The man on the bench replied, "Well, I imagine you'll find these people to be pretty much the same."

You see, no matter where you go, there is one factor which is constant—YOU! You bring your values, your perceptions, your expectations. And, generally, what you look for, you will find. What you expect to happen, your very expectations will help to make it happen. Therefore, happiness and fulfillment in life have far more to do with what you bring than with what you find. That's why it's very practical advice, in the words of the old gospel song, to "count your blessings, name them one by one." Once you start looking for blessings and giving thanks for blessings, that very act helps to multiply blessings!

The fact is that you cannot always control what life sends your way. And if you live long enough, you will have your share of disappointments, failure, sickness, and sorrow. That's just the way it is. We cannot control what life sends our way, but we can control what we will do with it. It's easy enough to give thanks when life is filled with blessings. And I certainly hope we will do that. But Paul suggests that we Christians have a reason to give thanks even in times in difficulty. The resurrection of Jesus is the keystone of our faith, and the reason for our hope and our joy.

Even if we are in difficulty, we are still able to be thankful, because God is here, because he is loving and powerful, because we trust that he is at work in our lives for good, and because we believe that he will win the final victory. And you know, the more you believe that, the more that very expectation will assist God in making it happen! You understand, then, what I mean when I say that we Christians are not at the mercy of our circumstances. Thanksgiving does not come from circumstances. Thanksgiving is a choice!