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“The Grateful Heart”
I Thessalonians 1: 1-10
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church
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According to theologian Meister Eckhart, “If the only prayer you say is thank you, that would be enough.” And in today’s scripture, Paul’s got the thank you prayer in spades. He tells the young church at Thessolonica, “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Later in this letter Paul will urge the Thessalonians to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

I’m intrigued by Paul’s joy and gratitude, overflowing and spilling out of this letter. How can one be in a constant state of gratitude, prayer and remembrance? First of all, it is necessary to examine how our notions of gratitude. For most of us, gratitude is a feeling or expression that results from something fortunate happening to us. But as one pastor notes, “One secret to developing a heart of gratitude is that we don’t wait for something to be happy about. [Rather, as he notes,] We stretch ourselves and claim the blessings of God’s presence in every situation, no matter how lonely we may feel.”¹

But some of us, myself included, focus on the negative, big or small, rather than noting the positive. Never mind actually being grateful even in a bad situation. Not so long ago when I was going through the ordination process and searching for a church to pastor, I had many difficult situations as a result of my position on ordination of homosexuals. (Lucky, that’s not really a problem any more thanks to the changes in the constitution of the denomination.) After one particularly devastating incident, I remember being at a restaurant and just looking around at everyone thinking how lucky they were that their feelings about homosexuality didn’t have any bearing on their careers. How lucky they were that, whatever their profession, their jobs wouldn’t be at risk for even *being* homosexual, much less for their *attitudes* about homosexuality. I was so upset and envied everyone I saw. Their lives were so much better than mine. It wasn’t fair. (Let’s overlook the ridiculousness of my envying people I didn’t even know and assuming their lives were better than mine simply because they weren’t me.) I definitely didn’t have a drop of gratitude in me at that time. As far as I could see, there was nothing to be grateful for.

Contrast that with this story, as told by Wilkie and Noreen Cannon Au in their book *The Grateful Heart*:

“Out of the wreckage caused by the global economic crisis of recent years and the financial ruin of those scammed by Wall Street crooks comes the

¹ Stephen P. West, “The Grateful Heart,” *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 297.

inspiring story of Kim Rosen who lost her life savings in the Bernard Madoff Ponzi scheme, but in the process rediscovered something precious about life. In her book, *Saved by a Poem*, she shares how her devastating loss [*sic*] led surprisingly to a new level of gratitude that gave birth to a deeper appreciation for life's simple pleasures. 'I discovered a quality of gratitude for life itself: this moment of conversation, this breath, this ray of sun on my back,' Rosen states. 'When I lost my life's savings, I found myself opened to life's simple wonders in a way I had never experienced before. It's not conditional, not based on having something—money, or security, or health—as opposed to not having it.'"²

Certainly a different approach to difficult circumstances than mine. And, of course, cultivating the grateful heart is about more than the obligatory thank you. It's about more than being thankful when good stuff happens to us it is, as Paul shows, a spiritual matter for always. In bad times as well as the good. And it's not easy, it is an ongoing, lifelong challenge on the path to spiritual growth and maturity.

The idea of being grateful in all circumstances reminds me of Bev, a dear member of the church where I did my internship. At the weekly Bible study, we'd share prayers of joy and concern with one another, much as we do in our worship here. Bev *always* had a joy to share. When I first met Bev, her beloved husband of many decades had recently died after a long struggle with cancer, and yet, Bev always had a joy to share. Sometimes she really had to work to come up with something—after in the midst of a long stretch of rain, perhaps she'd express joy that it wasn't snow—but she always could find *something* to be grateful for.

I'm going to do something a little different today. It seems odd to stand up here and preach a whole sermon *about* gratitude. I'd rather give you an opportunity to nourish your grateful heart.

- Take some time to think about your blessings, what you are grateful for. Begin a list.
- Paul expresses joy and gratitude for the church in Thessalonica, that despite the persecutions to which they have been subjected, that they "became imitators... of the Lord" and "received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that [they] became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." So I invited you to look back on your list, try to focus less on what you have, including relationships and opportunities, and more on what God has brought you through and the joy it brings.
- Today's scripture is a letter from Paul to the early church in Thessalonica. It is believed to be the earliest extant letter written by Paul. Review your list once more. Write a letter of gratitude. Perhaps it is a letter to God. Perhaps a letter to someone on your list.

² Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Grateful Heart: Living the Christian Message*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 1, quoting Kim Rosen, *Saved by a Poem* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2009), quoted by Valerie Anderson, *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2009.

Take your letter home with you. If it is written to someone you know, you might choose to send it to that person. If your letter is addressed to someone no longer living, you might choose to read it out loud. If it's to God, you might wish to pray it. Whether or not you ever send the letter, keep the sentiment fresh in your heart. Develop your grateful heart. Seek to find the cause for rejoicing in everything, every day. Wilkie and Noreen Cannon Au note, "Modern research in psychology...suggests that Paul's stringing together three elements of happiness, prayer, and gratitude contains the secret of living with deep satisfaction and well-being.... there is a real connection between gratitude and happiness."³

But there's more to gratitude than our own happiness. And it's not gratitude for the sake of gratitude. As the AUs clarify, "Christian spirituality sees the importance of fostering gratitude not only because of its important link to personal well-being, but also because it moves us to a generosity that benefits others."⁴ That is, the gratitude we *feel* as Christians leads us to *act* as Christians.

Rather than feeling sorry for herself for needing a heart transplant or feeling a victim of an unfair world when she had the undoubtedly extremely painful surgery and recovery, after her successful heart transplant, political science professor Elizabeth Bartlett, a wrote in her journal:

"I have found that it is not enough for me to be thankful. I have a desire to do something in return. To do thanks. To give thanks. Give things. Give thoughts. Give love. So gratitude becomes the gift, creating a cycle of giving and receiving, the endless waterfall. Filling up and spilling over. To give from the fullness of my being. This comes not from a feeling of obligation, like a child's obligatory thank-you note to grandmas and aunts and uncles after receiving presents. Rather, it is a spontaneous charitableness, perhaps not even to the giver but to someone else, to whoever crosses one's path. It is the simple passing on of the gift."⁵

The grateful heart can lead to increased happiness, though that's not the reason to cultivate the grateful heart. Neither should we live in gratitude to somehow prove our worthiness to God, though we know that all blessings flow from God. Ultimately, the grateful heart is one of the many ways we follow Christ. As Paul writes in today's letter to the Thessalonians, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." So let us imitate Paul in his example of giving thanks always, in his example of the well-developed grateful heart, even as we follow Christ's example of loving God with all our heart, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

³ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, 4

⁵ Quoted in Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 7.