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Valleyview Mennonite Church
October 8, 2017
1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

Giving Thanks in all circumstances

Stories of Goha, a mythical figure, are told throughout the Middle East and Turkey. Sometimes he's a trickster, sometimes a philosopher, and sometimes a fool. The stories are usually humorous and they often provide some important insight. Let me begin this sermon by telling you a story of Goha.

One night Goha looked out of the window and saw a large figure of a man standing in the garden in the moonlight, his arms outstretched wide. He hurriedly woke his wife. "Bring me my bow and arrows," he said. "There's some dangerous fellow in our garden." He drew back his bow and loosed off an arrow. The arrow hit the apparition in the belly. "That will teach you to meddle with me," said Goha proudly. But he was afraid to go out into the garden all the same. "We shall leave him until the morning," he said. The next day he went out into the garden, and saw an arrow sticking out of his robe which was hanging on the line to dry. Goha fell on his knees and began to give loud thanks to God. "Why are you praying so fervently?" asked his wife. "Can you not see?" he replied. "My arrow went right through the middle of my robe. What would have happened to me if, but for the mercy of Allah, I had been wearing it at the time?"

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;

This past week as I was reading these words of Paul and preparing this message I was sick with a bad cold. But that pales in comparison with all the stuff happening in the world. Hurricanes affecting Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Tensions rising between the United States and North Korea. The hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who have been killed, are in hiding, or have fled Myanmar to horrible conditions in camps. The mass shooting in Las Vegas where 58 people were killed and over 500 injured, one of 273 mass shootings in the United States in 2017. Sometimes it's difficult to rejoice. Sometimes it's difficult to pray without ceasing. Sometimes it's difficult to give thanks.

The Christ followers in Thessalonica were no strangers to suffering. They were a persecuted church. Thessalonica was an important Roman centre, the capital of the province of Macedonia. They had regular opportunities for residents to publicly declare their allegiance to Rome and the Roman Emperor. In claiming the lordship of Christ, the church refused to participate in this public oath-taking. In response the civic authorities took strong measures against the fledgling church. At the same time self styled vigilantes from the community attacked members of the church without fear of public retribution. A number of the followers of Christ had already been killed at the time that Paul writes this first letter to them. It is a persecuted church that Paul encourages to “rejoice always,” and “give thanks in all circumstances.”

So why does Paul say it to them? Why does he make a point of encouraging Thanksgiving? Why this emphasis on giving thanks in all circumstances and situations?

First a disclaimer. Paul isn't denying reality and he isn't asking the Thessalonians to either. He doesn't say to give thanks **for** all circumstances. He tells the Thessalonians to give thanks **in** all circumstances. This is not about being grateful for the misfortunes that befall us. It is not about somehow welcoming hardships or celebrating adversity. But it is about developing an attitude of thankfulness. It is about knowing that God is at work in any circumstances. It is about being shaped by our trust in and reliance on God.

There are some dangers. In abundance it is easy for our perspective to shift. It is easy to lose our reliance on God. It is easy to believe in our own autonomy and our own self sufficiency. To believe that we don't really need God. That our prosperity is the result of our own abilities. That we are fully independent. When we give thanks to God, it is an inherent reminder that we are not alone and that we are not self-sufficient. Thanksgiving helps us to know that we rely on God, that every good thing comes from God. There is a song of thanksgiving that I enjoy where as you sing you give thanks for various things in your life. “Lord we thank you for the family that you gave us in this world.” Or “Lord we thank you for the music that you gave us in this world.” The chorus emphasizes the many things to be grateful for. “We've got many many things to thank you for so many many things to thank you for so many many things to thank you thank you Lord.” But whatever you've chosen to thank God for as you sing, the final verse is always “Lord we thank you for the things that we don't have in this world.” We give thanks that we don't have everything we might desire. A reminder against self

sufficiency and a prosperity gospel. A reminder that all comes from God.

There is a different danger in hard times and difficult circumstances. There is a danger of losing hope, of losing the ability to see the light in the darkness. Perhaps thanksgiving is one way of finding hope when things seem bleak. A woman who was suffering from depression was given this seemingly simple assignment by her counsellor. Every day, think of five things that you are grateful for. Any five things. Even simple things – like today I was able to get out of bed, or this morning my roommate made tea for me. While this assignment may seem simple, for this woman suffering from depression, it was not easy. She persevered, every day looking for five things to be thankful for. And for her, this constant striving to be grateful was part of her journey toward health.

Thanksgiving shapes us. But more than that, Thanksgiving also makes claims about the world and makes claims about God. When we give thanks to God, we are declaring something about who God is. We are saying that God is someone who is active in the world. Not only has God done great things in the past, but God continues to work in the world, now, and God will continue to create possibility in the future. We are saying that God is present in our lives. When we give thanks to God, we are celebrating possibility and hope. We are claiming that ultimately God is in control. In a world that is more and more indifferent to God, or even denies the existence of God, our Thanksgiving is clear testimony to the reality of God.

Many of the psalms are exuberant in their praise and thanksgiving. Often they emphasize who God is and God's place in the world and the thanksgiving grows out of this awareness. Listen to the beginning of Psalm 95: "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with Thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land." Giving thanks because of who God is – the king above all gods, the one who created the earth.

Or from Psalm 100: "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." Thanksgiving because

we belong to God, because God is faithful, because God is good and God's love endures forever.

Not that the psalms ignore the realities of suffering any more than Paul does. But often petition and thanksgiving go together, and even challenging God grows out of an attitude of gratefulness. In psalm 108 the psalmist is having trouble seeing God at work. He even questions God: "Have you not rejected us, O God?" (Psalm 108:11) And then the psalmist goes on to petition God for help in the midst of difficulties. But in what is clearly a tough situation, the opening of the psalm is remarkable. In the midst of trouble, the psalmist declares these words of thankfulness: "Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to you." (Psalm 108:2-3) While not afraid to question God, while willing also to lament what is happening, there is a remarkable attitude of Thanksgiving in the psalms that helps us shape our faith and helps us to prioritize God.

In all of this I want to acknowledge that there are times when we can't rejoice or give thanks. Times when life is just too hard for whatever reason. I think that is part of what the church is for. To pray when we can't. To rejoice when we can't. To give thanks when we can't. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians wasn't addressing individuals. Paul was addressing a church and his verbs are plural. When he writes "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;" he isn't saying it just to me or just to you. He is saying **collectively** "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;" Sometimes we can rely on our fellow Christ followers. Sometimes they can rely on us.

I want to close with one more story of Goha which expresses an attitude of daily thanksgiving and generosity in all circumstances. One day Goha lost his donkey and went to look for it. As he walked along the road, he was loud in his praises of Allah. 'I understand that you have lost your donkey,' said a passerby. 'Why then are you praising God?' 'I thank God that I was not on it when it disappeared,' replied Goha. He went on his way and began to sing. 'What are you singing for?' asked another. 'When one loses one's donkey there is more cause for tears than laughter.' 'There's still a hope that my donkey is on the other side of that hill in front of me,' said Goha. By the afternoon Goha had still not found his donkey, and he had put up notices in all the coffee shops that whoever found his donkey could keep it, and he would give him saddle and bridle as well. 'What sense is there in that, Goha?' asked a friend. 'Now even if the donkey is found, it will no longer belong to you. What good can it do you?' 'Have you never heard of the great pleasure that finding something gives?' replied Goha.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday may we be shaped by an attitude of Thanksgiving. May we know that we are reliant on God. With our gratefulness may we proclaim the ongoing work of God in the world. And may we respond to our creator with Thanksgiving in all circumstances. Thanks be to God. Amen.