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Valleyview Mennonite Church
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171217 farewell sermon

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
Do not quench (extinguish, put out, stifle suppress) the Spirit.
Do not despise the words of prophets,
but test everything;
hold fast to what is good;
abstain from every form of evil.
May the God of peace himself sanctify you **entirely**;
and may your **spirit and soul and body** be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you **is faithful**,
and he will do this.
Beloved, pray for us.
Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.
I solemnly command you by the Lord
that this letter be read to all of them.
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. **2** We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly **3** remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **4** For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

Grace to you and Peace. Our advent text for today comes from the end of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. He finishes his letter with some final advice and a blessing. He begins the letter with these words. Grace to you and Peace. And then with Thanksgiving. Paul writes: "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. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you.” As Charleen and I finish our time with you as pastors, this is what I want to express as well. Grace to you and peace. And I give thanks for you and for the times I have seen God at work here at Valleyview over the past ten years.

As I was thinking about this message, I went back and read the annual pastors reports and council reports from 2007 until now. It was interesting to put myself back in 2007. Charleen and I came as new, inexperienced pastors. We arrived to a congregation that was still hurting and divided over the painful end to the last pastors tenure. I remember noticing with Charleen that ten minutes after Sunday school ended, the place was empty. Hard to believe with the conversation that now continues until one, but in 2007 people didn't hang around to talk. It felt to us then that this was a sign of the division that was still there in the congregation. About a year and a half later, we noticed that people were hanging around for half an hour, 45 minutes, an hour. It seemed to be a sign that perhaps some healing had happened. That God was at work at Valleyview.

I remember trying a number of things in those first few years, some of which worked and some of which didn't. When we arrived, Valleyview had experienced very low numbers for summer worship services. Worship committee decided that rather than feel like a very small group in a large space that we should worship in the basement during the summer. It did feel fuller downstairs and by the second summer it felt cramped. We began to get some... feedback, and we moved back upstairs the next summer. Our summer numbers have been such since then that there is no way we could worship downstairs anymore.

At the time we arrived, Valleyview shared this building with Agape and with Vision Mennonite. Vision was a Korean Mennonite congregation that had started as a Korean group within Valleyview and had then become independent. Shortly after our arrival, our friend Bok Ki Kim became pastor there and then they celebrated 10 years together as a congregation. It was with great sadness that we watched them decide to close in 2011. One of the things I have loved about Valleyview is your willingness to open the doors of this building to other congregations despite the friction that occasionally results. I believe God is at work in this. Now it is Agape

and Jesus First Assembly and I think those relationships are a gift to all three congregations. I give thanks for them.

I also give thanks for Valleyview's interest and commitment to issues of Peace and Justice. Early in our time here we wanted to support American war resisters who had fled to Canada, even having conversations about whether we were able and willing to offer sanctuary if that was desired. We have supported the London Interfaith Peace Camp, which brings together Muslim, Jewish, and Christian children to learn about each other's faiths and to become friends. Charleen has become passionate about this initiative and has valued the support of Valleyview it. Welcome Wednesday began during our time here, on Lynne's initiative, and we have explored other aspects of food justice in the last couple of years. A highlight for me has been greeting two families of refugees at the Toronto airport as they began their time in Canada through the sponsorship of Valleyview. I remember a mission and social concerns meeting in our first couple of years here where we as a committee decided to consider sponsorship. At the time Mennonite Central Committee had put a call out to consider sponsoring Palestinian refugees who were in Iraq. After Valleyview decided to move forward we instead ended up sponsoring the Adamu family. Then we brought in Solomon to reunite this family. We supported the Ballesteros family through their deportation. And then we welcomed the El Bekai family and now a family from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am so proud of Valleyview for this work and so thankful that Valleyview has taken on these sponsorships, showing a bit of God's light. I believe God is present in Valleyview's concern for Peace and Justice.

God has also been present with us through hard times. One of the things I've learned here is how often God works outside of our plans. One of the most difficult times at Valleyview was when we explored becoming an officially welcoming congregation to LGBTQ Christians. It was a time of conflict. Leadership came up with a process that we thought was pretty good. Although some good things happened through the process, in the end it didn't get anywhere. Then, a group of six Valleyviewers with opposing views on this question got together to discuss their similarities and places they could agree. They came up with a hospitality statement and covenant they could all agree to. Valleyview as a whole decided we could agree to it as well. I believe God was at work creating a way forward for our stalled congregation.

I give thanks for the intergenerational character of Valleyview and the caring for the children and youth in this congregation by people of all ages. I remember going with the youth

to Chicago on a service trip in our first full year here. I remember watching the youth change and grow and become during that week of March break. I saw the same happening when the youth went on a similar trip in 2014. We have as a congregation worked hard at Christian formation, spending a year doing a workshop rotation model of Sunday school, a fall where we took a break from Sunday school and had WE worship services around tables in the sanctuary, and the current model using the Shine! Curriculum. We **celebrate** our children through milestones from wonderful child dedications to quilts sending them off from high school. And of course, there is the weekly coin offering which is a special time of connection with the children as well as a time of learning about giving. As a family we have felt the love for our children Tobias and Mattea, from their own birth and dedications until now. It has been a joy to watch their relationship with this congregation. I give you thanks for that.

For now I will name just one more, and that is the love and caring that Valleyviewers show to each other. I have seen the way that Valleyviewers support each other through good times and bad and that is a blessing. We as a family also experienced that through the year long journey with Charleen's dad's dying. We experienced care through meals, conversations, notes, prayers and the way many of you followed our caringbridge blog. It was also incredibly meaningful to have the male quartet sing for dad and mom in the ICU that spring. God was present for us in many ways through Valleyview during that time.

In fact, as we near the coming of Jesus' birth, of God becoming incarnate among us I want to say that perhaps that's what this message is about. Perhaps it is a reflection on some of the ways that God has been incarnate among us here at Valleyview over the past ten years. God came to dwell among us - Immanuel - so long ago. But God continues to be among us and has been present at Valleyview. And I believe that God will continue to dwell among you here at Valleyview, even as God journeys with our family along another path. And so in the words of Paul I want to give thanks for our time at Valleyview. "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. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you." Grace and Peace. AMEN.