

Giving Thanks in All Circumstances

[This is based on a sermon given at Pilgrim Church in Beverly, MA, on March 14, 2021]

This is the season of Lent and the topic for the day is thankfulness. My friend Samuel Caraballo, who preaches sometimes in Newton, once started a sermon by saying, “What was I thinking?” Here Jesus is walking into the worst week of his life, we’ve been living with COVID-19 for more than a year now, the country is divided more than at any time since the Civil War, and there are messes around us everywhere we look.

What was I thinking? Charles Dickens once started a book by saying, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times,” and that statement is true for almost every year in history. This last year, however, has had plenty of lower lows than most years in recent memory. There is no denying that many of us have had hard times as we came through it. We mourn with Joe over the death of his mother, when he and his brothers couldn’t even be with her. I struggle to talk with my high school friend in New Jersey, who may never recover from what my doctor calls the “covid confusion” that keeps her from thinking clearly. I spent the year feeling that I was under a death sentence, with four out of five of the high risk factors for dying of Covid (diabetes, heart trouble, lung trouble, and just being old).

Of course the negatives do point out how much I care about the positives. Not being able to hug my children and grandchildren for a year has shown me how much I love my family. Even as an introvert, social distancing has shown me how much I really do miss being with people, including all of you. Not being able to travel reminds me how much I enjoy the glory of God’s creation in the lakes and mountains of New Hampshire.

So here we are, in the middle of one of the most irritating of times, isolated, distracted, and even often depressed, trying to understand how thankfulness matters, and why it should be part of every day of our lives. Paul says,

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

“Always” includes today, tomorrow, and all of next week. “All circumstances” include when we feel like it and when we don’t, when all’s going well and when things are not the way we’d like them. Paul was more right than he knew, because being thankful is actually good for us.

What happens in our brains?

Modern neuroscience has learned a lot about the way our brains really work. It turns out that the connections in our brains are like roads—those we travel a lot get big like interstates, and those we don’t visit much turn into dirt roads that disappear over time.

If we think about things that make us angry, the angry paths get very strong. If we think about things that make us happy, the pathways will grow to take us to more happy places. Hate and anger even turn off working parts of our DNA, while love and gratitude and kindness physically encourage healing and strength. We get to choose what grows and what kind of person we become, by where we direct our attention and energy.

The way we think, and especially the times when we’re thankful, have real physical effects in our brain and our character. There was an Indian story once that said that inside each of us is

a wolf spirit as well as other animal spirits. Someone asked, “Which ones will grow?” The wise man answered, “The ones you feed.”

Why do our thoughts matter? Paul said to the people of Ephesus:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

This is the way our minds work when we focus on our desires and not on our spiritual connection with Jesus and our Creator God.

How do our brains affect our attitudes?

One thing we know about our brains is that different parts have different functions, just like our bodies have eyes for seeing and ears for hearing. In our brains the prefrontal cortex is in charge of organizing what goes on, the hippocampus takes care of saving and bringing back memories, and the amygdala is the center for strong emotions like fear and anger.

The left prefrontal cortex is active when we're happy, while the amygdala is active when we're anxious or afraid. The good news is that we can affect the way these parts of the brain work by the way we think. In studies of people using mindfulness meditation, after eight weeks of practice, the amygdala was significantly shrinking while the left prefrontal cortex grew and became thicker. With our pattern of thoughts we can influence our brain processes either toward peace and happiness or toward fear and anger.

Another thing that researchers have learned is that the left side of our brains is specialized for positive, happy things, while the right side is specialized for more negative things like disgust, fear, and anxiety. Unfortunately, the negative side is about 3 times stronger than the positive side. In practice this means that it takes three positive events to counteract the effect of one negative event. The result of this negativity bias is that we need to pay attention to feeling our positive experiences to balance out the extra strength of the negative ones.

For instance, one way to counteract this negativity bias is to take the time every day to identify and savor three good things that have happened. This activates the left side and causes the positive neurons to fire together and grow stronger. This is part of the power of thankfulness. Saying “thank you” brings back our awareness and strengthens the impact of good experiences. Happiness is one of the hidden side effects of gratitude.

Paul advises us to use our minds and our attention to continue our transformation into people who are more like Jesus. He says,

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

How do we actually do this? Paul might not have been a scientist, but he was exactly right. He said,

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

The things we think about, the places where we direct our attention, really do shape us and help us grow.

How can we accentuate the positive?

When you look, you'll see that we're surrounded by blessings, and many things that aren't fun at the time, actually work for our good. Take a minute sometime to think about the things you have to be thankful for. What things do you have to be thankful for today?

God has given us so much that we have more reasons for gratitude than we can even imagine. As Paul says in today's passage,

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, **expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.** (Ephesians 2:4-7)*

As we've seen, our gratitude for this great kindness is also very good for us. Some day you might want to write down a list of blessings, just so you can be reminded on a dark day. We're often so busy that bright spots are hard to remember.

The list should always include the thought from John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

And then there is our ultimate hope and promise:

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

All that God has done for us through Jesus inspires our thanks and praise. How could we not be overflowing with gratitude?

Of course there are small gifts as well as really big gifts. Receiving a gift always has a glimmer of joy, even if you don't like the gift itself. Getting a gift means that someone cared enough about you to give it, and that alone should put a warm feeling in your heart. The key to feeling that joy and warmth is to take care to notice and appreciate all our gifts, especially those we usually overlook.

How do we learn to say thanks?

One of the reasons that I loved serving a black church was that so many of the folks there were ready to pray at a moment's notice. Some of the pray-ers, especially those who've been around for a while, would always begin their prayers with thankfulness.

What would they thank God for? They'd thank God for the gift of life, for waking them up in the morning to another new day. They'd thank God for food, and shelter, and family, and friends, and all the things that make our lives possible. We're really surrounded by blessings, from our first waking breath in the morning to our last breath before we go off to sleep at night. I loved to be reminded to be thankful, at the beginning and end and all through the day, for all the good works of God that make life possible.

I know that I often forget to be thankful. My most frequent failing is not saying grace before meals. When food is served and it smells so good, I just can't wait to take the first bite. Tasting the first bite, I usually think, "Oh thank you, Lord" for this taste. Oops. I was supposed to do that before the first bite, and I'm late again.

Jesus shows us how

How do we remember to say thanks? One group of lepers that Jesus met in his travels was in a bad situation. They might have heard that Jesus was a healer, but only desperation would give them any hope of a cure. As was required, they kept their distance while they called out for mercy to Jesus.

There wasn't a lot of conversation in this encounter. Their need was obvious. Jesus simply told them to go and have the priests inspect their skin. These lepers didn't have much hope, but they could at least follow instructions. They set out to see the priests, hoping that seeing Jesus had somehow made a difference. They acted in faith, even if it was faith borne of desperation. And as they went in obedience, the miracle of healing happened, and they were made clean.

One of the lepers had an insight. This healing was a great and miraculous gift. His gratitude pours out of him in a loud voice, praising the source of miracles, the Most High God. He doesn't forget to come back to Jesus, the one who made this healing possible, to bow in appreciation and to thank him.

Of course Jesus noticed that he was the only one to come back, the only one to express his joy and gratitude.

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:17-18)

Jesus points out that it's praise to God, and not thanks to himself, which was the appropriate response.

Jesus is our role model for expressing our thankfulness. Jesus showed his gratitude all the time. He didn't ever forget to give thanks before a meal. When he miraculously fed a crowd of thousands, Mark says,

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. (Mark 8:6)

For Jesus, giving thanks was always part of sharing bread. Even at the last supper with his disciples, Luke tells us that

He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

After the transfiguration, when the disciples Jesus had sent out came back to tell him all about their successes, Jesus rejoiced with them. He knew how much of his ministry was directly empowered by his Father, and he gave thanks for it all. We hear from Luke that

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. (Luke 10:21)

Jesus was a living example for those around him of expressing thankfulness and giving glory to the Father.

How can we be thankful in these difficult times?

So what can we find to be thankful for in these challenging times? I'm convinced that there must be some kind of unintentional benefits from this horrible experience. Let me tell you about some of the things I've noticed. You may not agree with my experience, and you may be able to discover some benefits that I haven't found.

To begin with, this time has given me a chance to learn what I really care about. When I miss something, how I feel is a measure of how much it means to me. This isolation has helped me understand how important my family and friends, and even casual acquaintances are to me. Not being able to hug my grandchildren (or anyone else) for more than a year has showed me how much hugs matter in my life. I'm grateful for all of the hugs I've enjoyed over the years.

I notice that people are walking around more and getting outdoor exercise. That's good. Neighbors are meeting neighbors they never had time to meet before, and strangers are nicer to each other when they pass on the street. People I haven't seen in a long time call to check in and share what we've been up to.

We're also getting to do some of those chores we've been putting off. There's been a lot of cleaning up and cleaning out around our living spaces and outdoors. It's a blessing that makes life more comfortable going forward, and we can discover treasures and recover memories that have been lost in the busyness of daily life.

Strangely, if we've managed to stay employed, we seem to have more money because we're spending less. We don't go to stores or malls as often, so we don't spend as much on things we didn't know we wanted. We take vacations that are cheaper and closer to home, or sometimes no vacations at all.

Many folks who are working are working from home. This saves the time, hassle, and expense of commuting. It also allows us to choose where to live, not having to live near work in the city or the high rent districts. This week I had a very helpful conversation with a support person named Lu, who when I asked said she worked from home in the Philippines. A man from Arizona had a small boy in the background while he gave me internet advice.

There is also clearly more time with families and children, which strangely allows us to deepen our relationships and grow in tolerance for each other. Patience and self-control are two of those fruits of the spirit that are great blessings to have, but not fun when we're stretched to grow them. Those who're living alone seem to have found or focused on one or two close friends to be in their "bubble"— to travel with, talk with, or simply hang out together. This is a time to remember and pick up on things you were too busy to do or enjoy earlier.

Having church services and activities like prayer groups on line makes them accessible to folks in many different situations. Folks who have moved away can worship together and keep contact with old friends. People who are home bound or traveling can come in from wherever they are. Those who are reluctant to actually go into a church can visit many different kinds of worship to find what matches their hopes and needs.

We value our friends more, and we have more in common with strangers. Masks fog up our glasses, and we share missing many of our favorite things. We've all been touched by depression, felt tired and discouraged, and we can reach out to comfort each other.

I am thankful that the vaccine was developed so quickly and that distribution is rolling on. I am grateful that I and many of the high risk folks have gotten our shots already, and that more vaccine is coming along. And of all the things I have missed, I will be so glad to finally get a haircut.

Our greatest gift

The biggest gift of all comes through belonging to Jesus

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

I have no idea what the new normal will be like, but this is what we were made to do.

Gratitude is for everyone, regardless of who you are and which side of the current controversies you happen to be on. Paul is clear that where you stand doesn’t matter. Giving thanks to God is the constant, wherever you come down on the issues of the day. Paul’s advice is for all of those who are brothers and sisters in Christ:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15–17)

Amen.