

“Live Gratitude. Really? Really!”
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1 Thessalonians 5:12-21

But we appeal to you, sisters and brothers, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 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 the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Matthew 10:7-8

As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

I had a bad dream last week. Not the kind where you wake up crying. One where terrible things happened, one after the other, going on and on. Interpersonal problems, plumbing, insulation, flooding, family health... I was moving from one person to another, from one situation to another, in what I believed was my home, trying to figure out why all these bad things were happening, trying to stem the tide. The people in the dream did not cause the bad things to happen but they compounded them.

As surreal as it was, I did not know it was a dream until Professor McGonagall appeared and told me. Even then, it was hard to break out of my perception of its reality. I felt I had no control, over anything. I couldn't make sense of any of it and was powerless to prevent it. It seemed a frightening reality. Only with McGonagall's appearance did I begin to know some relief.

Once I woke up and the mental fog cleared, I found my compassion for those whose lives seem out of control had grown.

The day before, I had visited with several people, some from church, others not. As I listened to one stranger's story, I thought, “My life is a piece of cake next to theirs. How do they bear it?”

In our first lesson today, the letter-writer Paul had heard from people at the church in Thessalonica. They were worried, scared. Things were not going as they had expected.

This letter was addressed to a small inner-city congregation of working-class people meeting in a home in this capital city of Macedonia, in the north of present-day Greece. Paul and his companions had founded this church some months earlier. Now the Thessalonians needed Paul's help and insight. He was probably writing from Corinth in 50 or 51 CE. This makes 1 Thessalonians the oldest piece of literature in the NT.

Paul offered the people instruction and encouragement. To give you some context, there was a lot of pressure for them to conform to society. This busy port city had a strong Imperial Cult. Worship and veneration of the Roman emperor was expected.

These people were trying to be faithful followers of Jesus, as they waited for Christ's imminent return. They had understood Paul to say that Jesus was coming back literally before any of them had died. But people had started dying and their hope was slipping. The delay was leaving them fearful. What if they had got it all wrong? Their expectations and beliefs were getting in the way of their ability to appreciate life and the presence of Christ in them in the present moment.

Paul addresses these tough questions by reminding them of the basics of the way of Christ. Doing these basic things, he writes, is the only way to live with hope in times of uncertainty. Listen again to his instructions:

Do your part to get along. Encourage stragglers. Be patient.

Be careful not to snap at each other. Instead, bring out each other's best.

Be cheerful; pray; thank God – all the time, no matter what happens.

Like so many of us, the Thessalonian are struggling. Their assumptions and hopes are bringing them down. Paul cautions them, and us, to remember that the proper response in such times is to keep living as God as Spirit leads us. Be thankful, generous, cheerful. Pray.

Human brains are wired to focus on the negative in any situation or experience. It's part of what allowed our ancestors to survive threats and to pass on their DNA. Noticing the bad kept the species going. But this instinct is less helpful now. Emphasizing the negative simply leads to dissatisfaction, fear, ulcers, autoimmune and other diseases. We have a choice. We can choose to notice what's good in each situation. We can consider our problems more holistically.

We each have unconscious ideas about ourselves and the world that can prevent us from enjoying life. Do you believe you don't deserve happiness? Do gratitude, compassion, generosity and forgiveness rule your days? Or are you always waiting for the other shoe to drop? If you're not sure, you might ask yourself, "Does this belief take me toward gratitude, or does it hold me back?"

Compassion, of course, is your awareness and connection with the plight of others combined with a desire to help. Gratitude celebrates what you already have in your life. Our capacity for love expands when we take the time to express gratitude. Neuroscience tells us that practicing both gratitude and compassion creates more happiness than seeking happiness itself. Generosity and forgiveness are compassion and gratitude in action. We choose.

More than 30 years ago, Dr. Carol Dweck's research team approached her about the work they were doing for her. It wasn't finished but their findings were so incredible that they told her, "You have to publish this. It can't wait." *Mindset* is that book. Basically, we all go through life with one of two mindsets. One, a fixed mindset says this is the hand dealt me. Deal with it. A growth mindset, in contrast, says the hand dealt me is only a starting point. A person with a growth mindset assumes that a task will be hard at first but that it will get easier as they work at it. Research showed that connectivity between our brains' neurons can change with experience.

So far, this was not terribly new or exciting. But the grad students had also discovered that our mindset is not static. They found that at-risk students who were coached to believe they could do math, in double-blind tests, performed differently than those who did not receive such coaching.

And this carried through into other parts of their lives. Their mindset had changed

Our thoughts create our reality. No matter which *mindset* we started with, we can choose to adopt either one – in 5th grade or in retirement. I'm aware that we each have different challenges. For some of you, life is all right. Others may feel that you're living a nightmare. Yet, even to this, Paul reminds us that following Christ means working to find joy, praying and giving thanks every day, in all circumstances.

When you woke up this morning, did you open your eyes and see the world around you? Did you hear the furnace running? Or smell coffee? Do you have a roof over your head? These are things to celebrate!

I'd like to share a bit of history about gratitude, since the word has gotten a bad reputation. In former times, gratitude described the system whereby the wealthy land-owners looked after the people who worked for them, seeing to their health and wellbeing. And in appreciation, the landless, poor ones gave their labor and their loyalty – farming their land in times of peace, fighting for them in times of war. When the system worked, everyone had what they needed. But systems break down. As property-owners grew in wealth, they might buy more land. Absentee landlords were needed but they were simply employees. They weren't invested in the system so were not really concerned about the landless people, what they would eat or their health or seeing to the education of their brightest children. Practices changed. People starved.

With this kind of history, we can understand how the word fell from favor.

One thing I lamented when I began pastoring was how often people took my time and my efforts for granted. I seldom heard a simple, "Thank you." Have you experienced this? You care, you do all that you can do, you're present, and no one even says, "Thank you"?

We are out of practice, both in offering gratitude and in receiving it. We can reclaim this spiritual practice, and not just in November.

Do you recall the 2000 film *Pay It Forward*? The new social studies teacher gives an assignment: think of something to change the world and put it into action. Twelve-year-old Trevor has the idea of doing good deeds for three people and telling them not to pay him back but to do the same thing for three new people so that the goodwill increases exponentially.

I believe we can spread a culture of gratitude in Wausau and beyond in a similar way. What if, each day, you are intentional about expressing thanks to at least three people, and each day you make sure you say it to different ones? Some folks will dismiss it since we have been trained from youth to devalue such sentiments. Others will wonder what you want. But some of the people you thank are aching for a kind word. Your quickly forgotten thanks has the potential to change their lives. Additionally, what if each time someone expresses gratitude to you, instead of dismissing it or explaining how it was nothing, you simply accept it? Smile maybe? Possibly even let them know what their words mean to you?

This is your assignment – today, and each day between now and Thanksgiving, no, the New Year – with the hope being that once you have practiced it for these 45 days, you will have developed a new habit. Created a new spiritual practice.

In the midst of the worst storms of life, we can live as Christ.
And let the people join me in saying... Amen.