

## **GIVE THANKS IN EVERY SITUATION**

I Thessalonians 5:12-18

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(online worship only)

I wrote this sermon on Friday from my home office. I was watching the snow fall all day long. The sky was gray; the only color I could see was provided by my poor shivering daffodils. My mind kept going to my original plan for the week after Easter - I had registered to attend a writing and book festival in Grand Rapids, Michigan with several friends. We made the plans last summer, and I was very much looking forward to it.

And, on Friday, I was thinking about conversations I'd had over the course of last week with people who are struggling. We're well into our second month of this new coronavirus-influenced life, and things are getting hard. It was to have been spring break for the public schools in Avon Lake; I know many trips were planned and cancelled. Without the online school work to do, parents were scrambling more than usual to keep their children happy and occupied. The weather doesn't help.

I heard from several members who spent last week telling employees whom they supervise that their positions are being terminated. One member couldn't get through each phone call without crying.

Marriages are feeling the strain of too much togetherness or financial insecurity or both.

Two beloved members of our church family tested positive for COVID-19 within the past week.

This is not easy.

**AND** we are grateful.

It is possible to acknowledge both of these realities at once - that we are living in an extremely challenging moment in time **AND** that, in this moment, we can express gratitude.

The author Robert Wicks describes the seeming contradiction with this real-life story: "Look at the sky over there!" my wife said. And as I turned around, immediately I could see what she meant. The low hanging dark clouds were a total surprise. The other direction in which I had been looking the sky was as blue as could be. I never expected a storm. How could I? Everything I saw up to that point was fine.

Both views needed to be real for me. If I ignored the fact that the storm was coming soon, it would only result in me getting needlessly soaked. On the other hand, to forget that the way I was looking was also a reality would be to make a blue sky dark when it wasn't. Both were real.

During trauma, stress, and a pandemic like we are going through now the same is true: things are tough and scary...but they are also filled with possibility if we have the eyes to see."

What does it mean to feel grateful in the midst of a pandemic? First of all, realize that I'm not suggesting we feel grateful **FOR** the pandemic, not in any way. We don't feel grateful for war or for cancer or for any life crisis, but we can feel grateful in the midst of each of them. When we do so we are acknowledging that gratitude does not depend on our external circumstances.

Gratitude is an intentional choice of perspective. When you choose to be grateful, you are choosing to see the full picture - the challenge as well as the opportunity. The possibility as well as the difficulty. And what happens when we choose is that we realize that this crisis has not stolen everything from us. We still have the freedom to choose how we will react. It's an empowering feeling. It keeps us from feeling or acting like victims.

David Steindl-Rast has written extensively on the topic of gratitude. He is now 93 years old. He was born in Austria and spent his teen years living there under the Nazi regime. He remembers that he would hear bombs falling every night. He and his family members and friends all talked about the fact that they never knew, when they went to bed, whether or not they would wake up in the morning. Each morning, when he woke up, he would give thanks that he had lived to see another day. He did not take one day for granted, and he has maintained that practice of gratefulness his entire life. (If you want to know more about him and his work, his website is: [gratefulness.org](http://gratefulness.org).)

He breaks down gratefulness into three steps: Stop, Look, and Go. I want to tell you what he says, and then try to connect each of these three steps to our current experience.

STOP refers to deliberately stilling all the distractions around us and reflecting on where we are and what we are feeling at the present moment. Being fully present. Paying attention. Our youth director Nate Taylor and I had a meeting on Thursday to begin to discuss different scenarios for our youth group activities for this summer. He talked about how his online conversations with the students are going; he told me that

one student is making a photo diary of sorts - taking pictures of the “closed” signs on storefronts, the empty streets. I was struck by this wise advice Nate shared with our youth. He said to them, “It’s not often that we know that we are going through a historical moment. You may not be able to process it now, but you can write down or draw or record in some way what you’re seeing and feeling and thinking. You’ll be glad, later, to have the details. STOP and be fully present in this moment.

LOOK refers to asking this question, “What is the opportunity of this given moment, only this moment, and the unique opportunity this moment gives?” Here at the church we are starting to think about how to do ministry differently over the next several months. We may not be together as a large group for a while, so what are the possibilities for small group gatherings that would be meaningful? I miss our Sunday morning worship experience desperately, but at the same time, I have had some beautiful encounters with people on the phone and by email - some of them people I haven’t been in contact with in years. LOOK for what is positive and possible.

GO is following God’s nudge to DO something for someone else. Pick up the phone, write a note, make an extra pot of soup, donate money to our food drive. The people I know who are coping best are those who are finding ways to be of help.

STOP, LOOK, GO.

This crisis has spurred some amazing acts of creativity and kindness. I have loved seeing the families producing parodies of songs, the homemade hearts hanging on trees all over town, the handpainted rocks by walking paths. I have loved helping to

be a matchmaker when someone emails me to say, "I'd like to take Easter dinner to someone in the church - do you know someone who would appreciate that?"

One of the essential workers we are honoring today is Mark Sajna who is the executive director of Independence Villages in Avon Lake. His daughter, Meredyth is an active member of our church; she attends along with her daughters Julia and Jane and her mother Bev. Meredyth sent in a picture of her dad along with this tribute: "He has been working hard, since before the quarantine started, to keep his residents safe. He started putting protocols in place early, shutting down events and limiting visitors. He has been a true leader to his staff, keeping up morale. He has been working with life enrichment to keep residents happy and engaged, in a time when they cannot visit with family. He helped with the Honk for Hugs parade (dressed up as Cookie Monster); led a small resident parade in the hallways on what would have been Indians opening day, singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"; playing games like ping pong and cards with residents; and getting out and spending time with them. He spent 3 hours on Easter dressed as the Easter bunny, delivering baskets to every resident. He truly cares for every resident in the facility and making sure they remain healthy and loved. We are very proud of him for the hard work he is doing." I found this picture on Facebook of Mark as the Easter Bunny visiting Bill and Ruth Higgins.

Today I am also thinking with gratitude of my brother-in-law David Brill, a physician with the Cleveland Clinic system. David has a family practice office in Rocky River. Early in the crisis, he was informed by the Clinic that he would need to be prepared to deploy to the hospital if necessary, so some special training was given at that time. Happily, Ohio has done a great job flattening the curve and David maintained

his work in his office, doing tele-medicine. Then a call came to see who among the Clinic's nurses and doctors would like to volunteer to go to one of the hard-hit cities, either Detroit or New York. David volunteered, and left on Friday. He's spending two weeks at a hospital in Brooklyn.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest book written in the New Testament. Paul writes words of encouragement to this church, hoping that people will stay the course, even when times are tough. Maintain faith, even when those around you are not. And show your values, demonstrate what you believe, in these everyday ways: "respect those who are working with you; think of them highly with love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Give thanks in every situation." Not FOR every situation, but IN every situation.

Did you know that when you practice gratitude, your brain chemistry begins to change? I consider it a miracle! The more you focus on the things for which you are grateful, you less stressed you will feel. Different pathways in the brain are formed. We begin to feel more positive, more content; we sleep better. You can start as simply as this. Begin or end each day writing down three things for which you are grateful. If you do this faithfully, you'll start being aware during the day of what you want to write down. You'll start paying attention to the gifts you've taken for granted before. It's such a good practice for these days, when we're all aware of what we've lost, to remember what we still have.

If you want to do more, try writing down the names of three people each day you want to thank. How about leaving a note in your mailbox for the person delivering your mail? Or a note on your door for the truck driver delivering items? Have you thanked the people stocking shelves at the grocery store, the cashiers, the guys who pick up the garbage?

And one final practice for those of you sharing your living space with someone else. It's easy to notice the habits that are bugging you about your companions, as we spend so much time cooped up with one another. If you're feeling irritated, try this instead. Try noticing, today, three things you appreciate about your spouse or your child. Tell them, thank them. Chances are, you'll both feel better.

How wonderful is it that God has created us to be grateful? That our bodies work better when we express gratitude? How miraculous that the more thankful we are, the more thanks we express, the more alive we feel?

If you are an essential worker, we here at the Avon Lake United Church of Christ give thanks for you. We give thanks for those who take risks so that the rest of us are fed and safe and healthy. We realize, now more than ever, that we are bound together in community, in a web of mutuality.

Let us encourage one another to be grateful, and let us enthusiastically show our appreciation for these essential workers.