

RESILIENCE AND GRATITUDE

I Thessalonians 5:12-24

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These are my hiking shoes. They started the year 2020 with a passport and a ticket to Scotland, and plans to go up and down the Scottish highlands. Instead, they have hiked French Creek MetroPark and the Cuyahoga Valley National Park; they have been to Sleeping Bear Dunes and Nelson Ledges and many places in between; these boots have left their prints in the Allegheny National Forest and the Laurel Highlands. For every walk I've taken, every forest that has healed me, every bird whose song I've heard, for all the places close to home I've been privileged to explore, I am grateful.

For more time to read, more dinners at home, a slower pace of life, and one of the most gorgeous summers in recent memory, I am grateful.

For the promising news of a vaccine, and for health care providers who inspire me with their determination, I am grateful.

For this congregation, and all of the ways you have shown generosity and compassion - for record food drive donations, for cards sent, phone calls made, for men who pray for each other on Monday morning zoom calls, for volunteers who sort clothes at the Thrift Shop, for committed

leadership and for colleagues who care about each other and work together well, I am grateful.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday in the year of our Lord 2020, our text comes from the letter to the church in Thessalonica, a city in northern Greece. It is probably the oldest piece of writing in the New Testament, yet its words could have been written yesterday. They are words of encouragement to the church, words which remind Christians of who we are called to be. We are called to be people who live in peace with one another, who comfort the discouraged, who help the weak; we are called to be people who are patient. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in every situation. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in every situation.

The writer Anne Lamott introduces her readers to her friend Barbara. Barbara has ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. As the disease progresses, Barbara can't go anywhere without a walker, feeding tubes and a computerized speaking device. One day, Anne and their mutual friend Susie picked up Barbara - they wanted to see the sights high above San Francisco near where they all live; they knew a place where they could get out and look at the ocean. They get to the spot, and it takes quite a bit of effort and time to get Barbara out of the car. As soon as they made their

way to the best place for a view, the fog rolled in and the wind picked up - and if you've been to San Francisco you know how cold it can get, quickly. Back in the car they went. Anne writes that she was feeling discouraged. Barbara's condition is so hard to comprehend. But they just started driving, through neighborhoods with beautiful gardens, then they found a place to park where there was public art, these brightly colored mosaic steps. The three of them turned the car off and talked. Anne writes, "We talked about real things for an hour: life, death, families, feeding tubes, faith. I asked Barbara, who doesn't eat real food anymore, 'What are you most grateful for these days?' She typed on her iPad, and her mechanical voice spoke for her, and it said, 'The beauty of nature, the birds and flowers, the beauty of friends.'"

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

Every day, think as you wake up, "I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it." Those are the words of the Dalai Lama. He is not joyful and grateful because everything in his life has gone well. China seized control of his native Tibet in 1959 and he has been living in exile ever since. He **chooses** to be grateful for the opportunities that exist even in exile. He claims that suffering has helped

him to develop empathy and compassion. He truly believes that the most painful tragedies of his own life have opened up ways for him to grow. **In every circumstance**, he says, “What is the opportunity in this? How can I use this as something positive? If I can’t do anything about it, I don't worry about it.” Instead of worrying, he looks for ways to be of service.

The Dalai Lama’s approach to life, which seems to come so naturally to him, is almost exactly the approach recommended by psychologists who study the science of happiness. One researcher says that there are three factors which have the greatest influence on increasing our happiness: the ability to reframe our situation more positively, our ability to experience gratitude, and our choice to be kind and generous.

None of those factors have been taken away from us. We have the ability to reframe our situation more positively - we have the ability to look for the good even in a situation none of us would have chosen. It may feel wrong to even think about doing so - to look for the good in the midst of a pandemic that has now claimed 250,000 lives in our nation alone. But it is NOT wrong; in fact, it is one of the best and healthiest ways we can cope. Keep noticing signs of hope.

Our passage does not say, “Be grateful FOR all things.” We are called to “Be grateful IN all things; be grateful THROUGH all things. Give thanks IN all circumstances.”

The writer Diana Butler Bass expresses it this way: “I’m not grateful *for* COVID, but *through* these days I’ve been reminded of the fragile gift of life, treasuring what I had taken for granted. I’m not grateful *for* political corruption, but *through* it I’ve come to value democracy and activism more than ever before. I’m not grateful *for* destructive fires and storms, but *through* them the awesome power of nature still stuns, reminding us of our dependence on the earth. I’m not grateful *for* economic distress, but *through* it I’ve remembered how we can live more simply and with more generosity and fairness. All of this has strengthened my love of God and neighbor, and left me more deeply aware of the tenderness of life and the necessity for dignity and justice for all.”

We have the ability to experience gratitude, and gratitude and resilience go hand in hand. Resilience is a set of skills that can be grown through practice - you can practice your way into becoming more resilient, and one of the best practices is gratitude. Gratitude reminds us that there is always something for which we can be thankful. Gratitude helps us feel less anxious, less depressed.

You can start the way I started this sermon. List the things for which you're grateful right now. The second step is to actually thank someone - pick up the phone, write an email, send a note in the mail, or one person suggests a gratitude visit, which can happen like this. Identify someone who did or said something that changed your life for the better. Write a letter to that person, be specific and concrete about what you appreciate about them, how they helped you. Once you've written the letter, make an appointment to talk to them - by phone or FaceTime or Zoom. Read them the letter and you will have given them something they might never ever forget.

So we have the ability to reframe our situation, we have the ability to experience gratitude, and we can choose to be kind and generous. These three practices will make us happier, even now. Especially now.

When you're grateful, you'll become much less fearful. It's almost impossible to experience both things at the same time. The more you focus on your reasons for thankfulness, the less you'll find yourself dwelling on all of the reasons we have to be afraid.

In many respects, the Christian life is about resistance. Jesus was called to resist the practices and values of the Roman Empire. He offered an alternative story, when people thought there was only one way to look at

the world. The prevailing narrative of his time said that rich people were morally superior to poor people, women weren't worth talking to, children were property, and if someone was sick it was because they'd sinned. Jesus befriended both rich and poor, he sought out women to be his followers, he joyfully hugged children, saying, "Let them come to me," and he touched the blind and the lepers and those with mental illness, restoring them to health and to their communities.

The Christian way of life, when it's lived most authentically, has always been an alternative way of life. Throughout history people have been tempted to believe that power and success and material things will make them happy; we worshiped celebrities long before Instagram and Youtube. Yet time and again we return to the story of Jesus, who lived simply yet joyfully. We have glimpses of what his kingdom is like. We know how we feel when we are living for others and not ourselves, when we show love in its purest form. We know, deep in our hearts, that a life of generosity and kindness is the most satisfying life of all. We know that when we speak up for justice we feel closer to God.

I believe that we are being called to speak an alternative truth in this very moment. To those who would say that the only reasonable thing to do is to complain and blame, or else hide and try to ignore and deny, we are

called to still be people who express our thanks and praise. Gratitude is an act of defiance and faith; it is the stubborn insistence that God is good and that God is with us.

From that place of gratitude, we realize how we will make our way in these short days and long nights of an Ohio winter, in this particular winter marked by grim statistics and endless questions. We will do what we are called to do, what we are literally created to do. Our brains are wired to find happiness; and the pathway is a life of kindness, a life of caring for others, a life of gratitude and resilience. We will get through this week and the weeks to come by doing what we have been practicing for years - saying words of encouragement to one another, asking for help when we need it, knowing that seeking help is a sign of strength not of shame. We will say the prayers we know and we will learn new ones. We'll hum to ourselves the hymns that have sustained us, and we'll put our favorite music on as loud as we want. We'll donate food and Christmas presents and send cards to those who are lonely. We'll learn that we can celebrate by ourselves and we'll give thanks and praise to the people who created Zoom and FaceTime.

This Thanksgiving remember who you are. You are a person who follows Jesus. You are a person of strength and faith, whose joy is not determined by external circumstances.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in every situation.

Amen.