

THANK GOD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 19, 2017
based on Deuteronomy 8:6-18; Colossians 3:15-17***

In recent weeks we have been confronted by all sorts of negative news—mass killings in our country on multiple occasions, nuclear threats by North Korea, and a whole variety of troubles across the globe. Moreover, we may be dealing with some real negatives—some significant problems—in our own personal lives. This week we celebrate Thanksgiving! Can we indeed be thankful?

We can gain real insight and perspective by looking especially at Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul speaks about being thankful throughout his letters, but he does so with particular and notable frequency in his letter to the Colossians, a few verses of which we heard earlier. In chapter one, Paul urges his readers to "joyfully give thanks to the Father," (Col. 1:12) in chapter two he urges them to "abound in thanksgiving," (Col. 2:7) and in chapter four he says, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving." Col. 4:2) And in the short passage we heard, Paul calls for thankfulness three times. He says "Be thankful" (Col. 3:15), then urges his readers to "sing songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:14), and finally concludes, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3:15) In fact, in the letter to the Colossians, Paul urges his readers to be thankful more often than he does in any other letter.

He must have been having a good day when he wrote this letter. Or so you might think. But in fact Paul wrote this letter during one of the toughest times in his life. He was imprisoned in Rome, dealing with multiple health ailments, near the end of his life. Things looked grim for Paul; yet he was abounding in thanksgiving.

At the same time, he sent this letter to some people who were in exceptionally good times. The town of Colossae, located in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), was a center for the production of fine wool and the manufacture of a certain dye, which brought considerable prosperity to the region. The people in the church in Colossae were probably the most prosperous of all the congregations to which Paul sent letters. Yet Paul seemed to feel a particular need to urge these people to be thankful.

Thus the letter in which Paul says the most about thankfulness—his letter to the Colossians—was written during Paul's worst times, when he presumably would have had the least reason to think about being thankful, and it was written to a group of people who were in the best of times, who presumably would have already had the greatest reasons to think about being thankful. But perhaps this very circumstance tells us something. Was it precisely the desperate nature of Paul's situation which particularly awakened within him a profound gratitude for what he did have? And was it precisely the prosperous circumstances of the Colossians which caused them to especially need a reminder about being thankful?

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, an orthodox bishop who became well known for his writings on spirituality, told a story once which can shed some light on this subject. “I was with a friend,” he wrote, “and since we were really too hungry to go on, we asked whether there was anything they could give us. They said, 'We have half a cucumber.' We looked at this cucumber and at each other and thought, 'Is that all God can give us?' Then my friend said, 'Now, let us say grace.' I thought, 'Goodness, for a cucumber!' My friend was a better believer than I and more pious, so we read [a liturgy] together, and then we read a few more prayers, then we read the blessing of the food, and all this time I had difficulty detaching myself from the half cucumber, of which a quarter would be mine, and then we broke the cucumber and ate it. In all my life I haven't been so grateful to God for any amount or quantity of food. I ate it as one would eat sacred food. I ate it carefully, so as not to miss any moment of this rich delight of the fresh cucumber, and after we had finished I had no hesitation in saying, 'And now, let us give thanks to the Lord,' and we started again in gratitude.” (*Anthony Bloom, Living Prayer*)

Sometimes it is when people are close to having nothing that they may become most appreciative of what they do have. Certainly we can see this dynamic among the early pilgrims in America. In their first couple of years, it was rough going in the Plymouth colony; the people struggled to raise enough food for the winter months, and at one point, they were reduced to a daily ration of five kernels of corn. Yet in that rough environment the pilgrims were profoundly thankful for what they did have. Perhaps their very closeness to complete poverty awakened within them a deep sense of their dependence upon God and moved them to be truly thankful for every blessing that came their way.

But then it is interesting to note what happened as time went on. Over the years, the settlers became more numerous and more established, and they became much more prosperous and secure. There were no more winters with five kernels of corn a day. Increased prosperity would surely lead to increased thankfulness, would it not? But interestingly enough, Puritan preachers at the time complained about the opposite effect—that as people became more prosperous, they became less thankful to God. Church leaders recalled an old Latin saying: “Religion beget prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.” (*Religio peperit divitias, et filia devoravit matrem*). Paul seemed to be worried about precisely this effect in Colossae—that as people experienced great blessing, they might be inclined to take their blessings for granted.

In this concern, Paul was echoing a concern expressed centuries before by Moses in the passage we heard from Deuteronomy. Moses was speaking of how God was leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land, where they would experience great blessing. But then Moses said, “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me

this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you power to obtain all things." (Deut. 8:11-14, 17-18) Moses cautions us when we enjoy many good things in life, it can be easy to begin to think that we are cause of it all; and we may forget our dependence upon God.

Certainly we see exactly this phenomenon in our society today. We have extraordinary prosperity, especially when compared to ancient Israel or seventeenth century New England; and yet in the midst of that, many people forget the real source of their blessing and want to imagine themselves to be self-reliant. So our age is perhaps especially in need of the admonition to "be thankful."

Of course, even if the society around us is generally prosperous, we may find ourselves in personal circumstances where we are dealing with serious trouble or lack. But precisely here the kind of thankfulness enjoined by the Scriptures can be extremely helpful, because in times of trouble an attitude of thankfulness to God can have a transformational effect, and in three key ways—

First, thankfulness moves us to take note of the blessings that we do have. It is easy to just get focused on what we lack or what is troubling us. Thankfulness gives us another perspective, as it moves us to take stock of and appreciate all the good things that that come us each day.

Furthermore, thankfulness to God directs us to recognize not just the immediate blessings that we have but the eternal blessings that are ours as we trust in God—the blessing of God's grace and unfailing care, the blessing of being a part of God's purposes, and the blessing of God's everlasting promises.

Finally, thankfulness to God lifts our spirit beyond the blessings themselves to connect with the Source. This is the most important effect of thankfulness—as it moves us not only to appreciate God's gifts but to praise God—and so to connect ourselves with the fountain of all goodness.

One might think that those who have been richly blessed would naturally be especially thankful. Paul realized that those who have been richly blessed might be especially forgetful of God. And so to those who had abundance he wrote the letter of Colossians, saying "Be thankful." Appreciate what you have and let it move you to acknowledge with praise the goodness of the Lord.

At the same time, one might think that those who suffer trouble or deprivation will not find reason to be thankful. But Paul showed in his own life that thankfulness does not arise when everything is perfect; thankfulness arises when our hearts are attuned to God and God's gifts. Whatever our circumstances, if we take hold of God in faith and let the Lord open our eyes to His goodness, we will find that we indeed have reason to give thanks, and our hearts will be uplifted in the praise of the Lord. So we will be able to live out what Paul would say in another of his letters, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all things." (I Thessalonians 5:16-18)