

## **“Give Thanks for Everything?”**

**Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 11/22/2020**

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

So, should we honestly give thanks for everything? As we read in Saint Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, he encourages the Christians there to “give thanks in all circumstances.” He even raises this admonishment to the level of being what God wills for them in the tradition of Jesus himself. I remember when I was only twenty years old and visiting an area called “Tierra Nueva” (new land) just outside of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. I was translating for a group of medical missionaries who were trying to help the poorest of the poor in the city, and this sprawling recent development looked like something from the makeshift refugee camps you’d see on television: structure after structure made of cardboard, old rubber tires, and any other material that could be pieced together to make a shelter, plastic, corrugated metal, any scrap items they could find—all stacked together, side-by-side along winding, dusty roads with natural sewage drains forming on both sides. It was easy to get lost and the stench was almost unbearable, but I was impressed with the group of medical personnel that came in from the US to help set up a pop-up clinic there. And this was the first time I met Salva and Norma, two of the humblest, kindest people I’d met up until then. I was already close friends with Salva’s brother who lived in a nearby village, and they took me into their cardboard hut with the pride of any new home owners, so they took to me immediately. Without hesitation they had me sit on a milk crate at their only official piece of furniture, a wobbly card table where they served me the only food they had—a spicy Chicken broth with flour tortillas. I ate reluctantly, seeing their newborn baby tucked away in a cardboard box-turned-bassinette in the corner, and clearly not enough food to feed all three of us: Salva, Norma, and myself. The small pot stewing over the homemade oil drum stove didn’t contain much, but they seemed so honored watching me eat from it as she placed in front of me proudly. I felt uncomfortable, yet humbled. I asked them how long they’d been living there. They excitedly announced they’d been there for five months now. I was surprised at the cheer I heard in their voices, but I was even more shocked by their next statement. “Le damos gracias a Dios por todo que tenemos” (We give God thanks for all that we have). I couldn’t help but think to myself, “thanks for what? For poverty, for destitution? For no running water, hardly any food? An unsuitable shelter?” But before I could finish my own internal rant of why they shouldn’t be so thankful, with an enormous smile Norma brought over the baby and asked if I could pray a blessing over her. My eyes welled up with tears at that moment. Of course they are thankful. They had everything they needed to survive another day, and they had this beautiful child too. Norma was perhaps one of the happiest people I had ever met. Her smile never stopped. I prayed the best I could a blessing over their child and family, and I asked God to help them more—but I don’t even think they knew what I meant—because they were content with what they had: Life, together—and that’s all that mattered.

So, are we really to give thanks for every THING? The good and the bad? I tend to think not. I find myself thinking, why should I be thankful for the evil in this world? This I cannot accept. But are we to be thankful IN all things rather than FOR all things? Well this I can make sense of. Even we read in scripture much more about this idea, right? In Colossians 3 we read that whatever we do, we should do it “in the

name of the Lord, giving thanks to God in Christ.” In Philippians 4 it says, “do not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Remember Psalm 100? “Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving in your heart. Enter those courts with praise.” Ephesians 5 tells us to “give thanks always.” I Chronicles 16 says, “now we thank you, O God.” Psalm 69 says “I will magnify the Lord with thanksgiving.” So there is little question that embracing an attitude of gratitude is God’s way. If we are to live in harmony as Creation with Creator, in fact, I would surmise that gratitude is a necessary component.

You may not all be aware that the Thanksgiving holiday, because of its direct tie to the mythology of the original “Thanksgiving Story” has become controversial for some—and that includes me (like many Native Peoples of this continent). For most Native tribes it is now considered a Day of Mourning rather than a day of “thanksgiving.” “Why?” you may ask. It is simple, really, perhaps too simple. The story we had all been taught, that of the original colonists at Plymouth Rock needing help to survive the winter, depended heavily on the local tribes to assist, which they did—and a feast most certainly had taken place in which food was shared; however, it was the series of events that followed which set in motion an oppressive zeal for subjugation, terror, and eventual genocide of many of the indigenous peoples of this land that has tainted the story—and though it started with the Natives assisting the settlers, the pilgrims, at Plymouth Rock, it ended with their ultimate destruction. Yet this symbolic story has been used to cajole Americans into taking time to count their blessings and give thanks to God for those many blessings in the spirit of the original pilgrims breaking bread with the Native tribes. However, because the story itself is flawed and co-opted for what some of us see as merely propaganda of false unity, many Natives have rejected it—though not all. I myself have only become particularly burdened with it, as a moral conflict, in more recent years. This is why our Interfaith Clergy Group has decided to change the service from simply a “Thanksgiving Service” but to an “Interfaith Service of Unity and Reflection” in order to honor our unity together in both grief and thanksgiving. We grieve with loss and the sins our nation we all call home now, and at the same, we are thankful like Salva and Norma, when we are simply happy to be alive another day, together.

The question then becomes for many of us, can you articulate your personal thanksgiving? What are you thankful for? Take a moment and contemplate that question... Now, name your truth. Name what it is you are thankful for. If you’d like to place it into the chat box, go ahead. If you’d like to say it aloud here, then feel free to do so in just a moment. If you’d like to say it quietly where you are, then do that. Just speak your truth. Speak your gratitude. Take your baby from the cardboard box in the corner of the room, and be thankful for what you have and that you have another day to experience this life together. I will give us a moment to name our truths now...

Shalom