



"Giving Thanks Despite the Pandemic"

Scripture – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Harvard Professor and best-selling author, Arthur Brooks, tells of the time he fixed a full Thanksgiving dinner for his new in-laws. He married his wife in Barcelona, and two weeks later he thought it would be fun to introduce his new Spanish family to this vital American tradition.

What initially seemed like a cinch, turned out to be a bit more challenging. Little did he know that turkeys are not easy to come by in Barcelona. The local butcher had to order one from a specialty farm in France and, when it arrived, it was only partially plucked. The turkey would not fit in their small oven and everyone was puzzled by the dish that had something red in it. Who knew that Spaniards had never heard of cranberries?

During the meal, his new family posed a number of questions. One person inquired, "What does this bird eat to be so filled with bread?" Someone else had a more philosophical inquiry: "Should you celebrate this holiday even if you don't feel grateful?"

He confesses he stumbled over that one. At the time, he thought a person should feel grateful in order to give thanks; otherwise, it seemed dishonest. He thought to himself, "It's best to be emotionally authentic, right?" Later, he concluded he was wrong. He came to understand that *acting* grateful can actually *make* you grateful.¹

Most likely you know someone who lives a comfortable life, yet routinely moans about inconveniences. Alternatively, you probably know someone who has suffered some harsh blows, yet possesses a spirit of gratitude. Despite genuine adversity, she can smile, be light-hearted and talk about her good fortune. That is because gratitude is not based primarily on your circumstances. It arises from your basic stance toward life. And your underlying view of life is shaped by your spirit. Do you believe you deserve to be here, or do you see life as a gift? Do you imagine that everything you are today is completely the result of your doing, or do you possess the humility to recognize parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others who helped you along the way?

As Professor Brooks came to realize, gratitude is much more than an emotion. It is a way of seeing the world and a way of being in the world. It is a recognition that each day – indeed each breath, is a gift.

One reason that some are not grateful is because we live in a culture that breeds discontent by constantly telling us that we do not have enough. Like a leaky faucet with a steady drip, we are assailed by a constant trickle that declares: You need more. You need newer. You need grander!

Lest we place all the blame on 21st century western civilization, our culture is not the only culprit. Another adversary hovers nearby hoping to squelch our desire to give thanks. Like a prowler lurking in the shadows, we overlook its presence, but it is poised to attack when our guard is down. It goes by the name of ENVY and it springs into action when we covet what others have. Envy chips away at feelings of gratitude by coaxing us to resent someone's better job, larger house, successful children or prestigious position. Envy of others creates a feeling that we are lacking something and rather than being grateful for what we have, we tell ourselves, "By golly, we deserve more!"

Is there a way to break this mindset of scarcity, to eradicate the cravings that consume us, and to wash away the feeling of dissatisfaction? And let's face it. We are in the midst of an awful pandemic, the likes of which we have never experienced. Millions are ill and many continue to die. Is now a time to celebrate Thanksgiving or should we give this holiday a holiday, and revive it next year? Today's scripture reading from 1 Thessalonians offers a clue.

The ancient city of Thessalonica was a center of worship for both Greek and Roman gods, including the imperial cult which named the Roman Emperor as "Lord" and "Son of God." Rome adopted a policy of religious tolerance. Citizens could worship the deity of their choosing, *as long as* they also bowed to the emperor.²

Paul's letter to this tiny band of Christians was a letter of encouragement to lead lives that are pleasing to God and to give ultimate allegiance not to the Roman emperor, but to Christ. He wrote to inspire these followers of Jesus to remain faithful despite the threat of persecution.

Understanding the dangerous context within which these Christians lived, it is all the more remarkable to read Paul's words to them. He wrote, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Most first century Christians came from the ranks of the poor and many faced persecution. Paul, himself, was writing from prison, and yet he counseled "Give thanks in all circumstances."

He was wise. He knew that our *basic orientation toward life* is more important than the *actual circumstances of our lives*. Developing a grateful heart is not predicated on good fortune. As we know, some people have things fall their way continuously, yet are never satisfied; others rarely catch a break, yet remain thankful for the gift of life.

Author Mary Jo Leddy writes that she saw her backyard as if for the first time when she was engaged in a conversation with a teenage girl from Africa. The youth was a refugee fleeing a country being decimated by the chaos of war. She landed on Mary Jo's doorstep with nothing more than an overnight bag. After showing the youth the bedroom where she would stay, the two went into the kitchen for a cup of tea. The teenager knew enough English to carry on a spotty conversation, and at one point she set her cup down and stared out the window. She asked, "Who lives there?"

Mary Jo responded, "No one lives there. It's the backyard."

"No," the young girl persisted and pointed. "Person there. House there."

It was then that Mary Jo saw her garage as if for the first time and the words slowly tumbled out of her mouth. "It. Is. A. House. For. A. Car." The teenager could not imagine a house for a car.

It weighed heavily on Mary Jo's mind and, given the housing shortage in her city, she decided to turn the house for a car into a room for a person. She went to City Hall for a building permit and found herself caught in a bureaucratic maze. She had numerous conversations with several different people which she sums up as follows.

"I want to turn my house for a car into a room for a person."

The reply was: "You cannot do that."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because then everyone would do it."

"Wouldn't that be great?"

A look of terror covers the face of the bureaucrat who says, "But then there would be no room for the cars. Permission denied."

Eventually, Mary Jo decided to turn the house for a car into a house for God, a meditation room. This time she did not bother attempting to get a permit.³

It all started when she began to view what she had from a new perspective. Developing a grateful heart comes from gaining a different perspective than the consumer perspective of our culture or feeling envious of what others have.

This will be the first Thanksgiving that Camilla and I will not be with any of our children or grandchildren. Concerns about COVID will keep us home. The same will be true for many of you. We certainly lament that fact.

Yet, we will still celebrate Thanksgiving and this year, with eyes opened a bit wider due to the pandemic. We grieve the death of those who contracted this terrible virus and the loved ones who will have an empty seat at their Thanksgiving table. But in addition to sadness, we know there is a great deal to appreciate.

Who does not have a deeper appreciation for health care workers and first responders? Who does not feel grateful for the people who stock and manage our grocery stores and those who pick up our trash and recycling? Who does not tip his hat to bus and taxi drivers? Who does not give thanks for scientists tucked away in labs working to discover a cure, not to mention people who step forward willing to get infected and then take an experimental drug? And I am grateful for the mayors and governors who mandate limits on the number of people who can gather indoors to prevent overwhelming our hospitals.

And though not being with family is a real disappointment, I'm grateful for this stark reminder of how important it is to be together with loved ones and friends, because there are times when we cannot.

Despite the pandemic and despite personal difficulties, I hope you will ponder your basic posture toward life. Is it on what you lack or what you have? When life throws something unexpected your way, do you choose victimhood or gratitude. When a challenge strikes, is your thought: Oh no! or is it: How can I make the best of it?

It does not need to be the best of times in order to say "Thank you." Nurturing a spirit of gratitude will ignite feelings of satisfaction for the gift you have been given – the marvelous gift of life.

NOTES

1. Arthur C. Brooks, "Choose to Be Grateful. It Will Make You Happier," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2015.
2. *The Discipleship Study Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p.2010.
3. Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 14-16.

Thanksgiving Prayer 2020 ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, knowing that you embrace us as your precious children and that your love for us is everlasting, we come with grateful hearts and bring our thanks to you this day.

We give you thanks

for your stunning creation and the beauty of the natural world,
for the rivers and lakes that supply our water,
for the rich soil and the lush vegetation that provide our food,
for amazing creatures on the land, under the water, and in the air.

We give you thanks for human life:

for the gifts of intellect and speech, and science and medicine;
for joys that lift our spirits and challenges that make us grow,
for surprises that keep life intriguing and hope that our world will overcome Covid-19.

Eternal God, we give you thanks for work to do and the will to do it;

for the encouragement and assistance of friends,
and for the marvelous gift of laughter.

Loving God, we give you thanks for family traditions and special memories,
for physical, emotional and financial support,
for taking us back when we have been surly
and forgiving us when we have been unkind.

Generous God, we give you thanks for our nation:

For a land of freedom and abundance, for laws based on justice for all,
for the right to voice our opinion, and opportunities to improve our communities.

Mighty God, we give you thanks for our church family:

For opportunities to hear your word in Scripture and to be stirred by music,
to speak to you in prayer, to listen for your whispers,
to touch others with your love by touching them with our lives.

Compassionate God, you have given us so much for our lives to be rich and abundant,
if this isn't wonderful, I don't know what is.

So, we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.