

“Always and in All Circumstances”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 19, 2023

Rev. Dr. John Wahl Micah 7:14-15, 18-20 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

Introduction

Today’s verses come from the final chapter of what – over these past five Sundays of reading from it – we have established to be the oldest text in the New Testament, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church, addressed to a people that he loved and longed to visit again. It is because of them – and the blessing that God has built them up to be – that Paul is filled with thanksgiving. Let’s listen for the word of God.

Read I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Surely, you have been on one side or the other of this situation: a child, or maybe a teen, is heading off to a sleepover at a friend’s house and are given a list of instructions. *Always be respectful; pick up after yourself; say ‘please’ and ‘thank you;’ call me if you need anything; in fact, just call me to let me know you’re okay.* The list might go on and on; but more often than not, these words are not even heard because the parent has said them, and the child has heard them, many times before. Maybe we hear this list of final exhortations from Paul to the church in Thessalonica the same way – barely listening.

And yet if we stop and pay attention to what Paul says here, we might find these to be valuable words. “Rejoice always,” he says, “pray without ceasing,” and “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (v. 16) These are ways that we can respond to God at work in and among us – with thanksgiving, prayer, and joy – at all times and in every situation.

As I am often apt to remind you, like in much of the New Testament, these instructions are plural. Paul is not speaking to individuals acting independently, but to all of the Christ-followers in Thessalonica. The entire community is to rejoice. And when? Not at some designated moment, nor only in good times, but always. They are to pray unceasingly. And they are to give thanks not just for the good things that happen to them, but in every circumstance.

In the first verses we heard today, the structure of the community is addressed through a need for respect and esteem of their leaders, as is the behavior of the community – encouraging the faint-hearted, helping the weak, being patient with all, and seeking to do good to everyone. The way of life together in this community that Paul proposes would have stood in opposition to just about everything that believers experienced in their relationship to the world around them.

It can be easy to forget the radical nature of Paul's appeal to do good to all, to help the weak, to not repay evil with evil, but only with good. In the Roman Empire of the first century, the standard which governed human relationships was different. Life was about maintaining one's respect, not giving it to others; about guarding what you had, not sharing it with others; about getting pay back, not paying forward.¹

We can, of course, say the same about today. It can sometimes seem like everyone is out for him or herself; and that loyalty, generosity, and empathy are lacking. We often appear more divided than united, whether based on where we are from, who we vote for, what amount of wealth we possess, or where – if we choose to – we worship. Paul's appeal here cuts against the grain of a self-centered world; urging his readers not only to a Christ-like way of life within the community but in openness to all; calling members in this community he loves to break through the restraints of human interactions that are focused upon the self; instead, giving of themselves for the sake of others.

In Christian communities, we envision this different way. As Paul says, we rely on the Spirit to inspire our response to God with prayer, joy, and thanksgiving. Especially with those who inhabit the margins of society – Paul labels them the idlers, the faint-hearted, and the weak – we are called to exercise patience. How hard it can be not to dismiss the discouraged and the dispirited; how hard to remain patient with the disorderly and those who seem always surrounded by chaos. How much easier it can be to lose our patience and relegate them outside of our view instead of making an earnest effort to, as Paul says, “do good to one another and to all.” (v. 15)²

Some of you might have grown up or, even, still maintain the tradition of listening to everyone gathered around your Thanksgiving table share something for

¹ Dirk G. Lange from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Beverly Gaventa, “First and Second Thessalonians,” *Interpretation Bible Commentaries*

which they are thankful. Like some of you, these experiences – for me – have been a mixed bag; sometimes the sharing has been very heart-felt and meaningful; other times more like pulling teeth, replete with ‘ums’ and ‘uhs’ and with the focus on what food sits on the table in front of them and whether the gravy will still be hot when everyone is finally finished talking.

Surely, though, Paul is on to something here in his letter. For when we ‘rejoice always’ or, at least, often and consistently; when we pray faithfully and regularly; and when we offer thanks in all times and circumstances – and when we do this not only as individuals but in and with the community – we come closer to experiencing the peace of God; that which – as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians – surpasses all understanding.

So, what I would like to do today is to spend the next few minutes gathering in groups of two or three people and sharing with each other – in this community – something that you have learned or experienced about praying always and giving thanks in every circumstance. Maybe this was an obstacle that you overcame or, possibly, some situation that you once feared where now you have found peace.

Where do we or have we felt gratitude? Take your time, you have about six minutes with one or two neighbors to share something for which you are thankful and to really listen – no need to worry about the food getting cold. I will give you a warning when we are halfway through.

Conversations with neighbors.

Thank you all for that time of sharing of conversation. And hear again the final verses of today’s reading, in the Common English Bible translation: “Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ’s coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.” Amen.