

With Glad & Grateful Hearts
I Thessalonians 5:18
November 22, 2009
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When I got back from vacation a couple of weeks ago, I was disappointed to learn that the Westside Interfaith Thanksgiving Service was not going to be held this year. I enjoy that service and it's been a wonderful opportunity for our diverse communities of faith to strengthen relationships and to gather in giving thanks. One year when the service was at Temple Beth'el, Rabbi Jonathan had coordinated the service and as the clergy were waiting, I thanked him for all of his work in this busy time...and then without thinking, I blessed him with the sign of the cross! There was this pregnant pause...and then Jonathan gave me the traditional Jewish blessing, and we all burst into laughter! Reminding us that giving thanks, to each other and to God, is not limited to one faith or another.

As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday it's good for us to remember that Thanksgiving is not limited to one nation or another, just ask our Canadian friends. As we know, our tradition in the United States goes back to the pilgrim days but as we also know probably did not originate in one event. The first feast is said to have been celebrated between the colonists and the members of the Wampanoag Native American community sometime between September 21 and November 11, 1621. The legends around the first Thanksgiving feast tell us that it had been a hard time for them and so together they gathered to give thanks for getting through it. Now here's an interesting question to think about, if each community, the settlers and the Native Americans, had done well on their own perhaps getting together to give thanks wouldn't have ever happened. Would we have this national holiday if it had been an easy time for them? But it wasn't an easy time, they did gather, and from that time on, Presidents Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt and others helped shape how a day of "giving thanks" would be celebrated in our nation. The course through history is interesting but more important is how are we going to celebrate the day this year.

For most, this has been a year of change and challenge; for many, not an easy time! So that short verse in I Thessalonians: "Give thanks *in* all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." can be experienced as more challenge rather than comfort or guidance. I think there are some who would wish "one little word" would change; instead of *in, for*. "Give thanks *for* all circumstances" seems more "doable" than "give thanks *in* all circumstances." Looking back on hard times, once we've gotten through them, and thanking God for them is easier...than giving thanks *in* the hard times. What enables us, empowers us to do this harder thing? We know the answer, but knowing it and living it, are two very different things! The answer is gratitude!

Throughout the centuries, people have shared their insights on giving thanks and living in gratitude. Examples of this are Dag Hammarskjold's, the United Nations General Secretary in the 1950's famous saying, "For all that has been thanks, for all that will be yes!" Another example is from an anonymous poet who shared this insight. "God is praised in gratitude. This is Meister Eckhart's one most excellent and needful prayer: Thank you. It feeds the well of joy. Gratitude. Thanksgiving. *In* all things I have learned to give thanks. Corrie Ten Boom learned to thank God for fleas; St. Paul, for the thorn in his flesh. In all things The best and most needful

prayer: Thank you!” And Aristotle, in an indirect way can guide us. He wrote that one learned justice by practicing justice, one learned what beauty was by exposing oneself to beauty and one learned what goodness was by doing good. The same principle can be applied to gratitude. We learn to be grateful but practicing gratitude.

So, how do begin practice gratitude? We’ve been given a jumpstart in the changes and challenges of this past year or so. We begin to practice gratitude by putting a stop on taking life for granted! It can be in the world of economics or health or relationships...whatever it is we may be taking for granted...when we stop taking it for granted, we begin to see things differently. A theologian summarized it this way; “In gratitude, the vicious cycle of dissatisfaction with life is broken and we begin anew in the recognition of what we have rather than in what we don’t, in the acknowledgement of who we are rather than in the awareness of who we aren’t!”¹

Once we stop taking life for granted we can begin to address any spirit of dissatisfaction within us. Dissatisfaction is not only discouraging but life-draining, whereas an attitude of gratitude is life-giving. This doesn’t mean that we fall into a state of complacency or all of us become Pollyannas, it means that our orientation in life, even with the things we work to change is one of gratitude...giving thanks *in* all things...not necessary *for* them.

And in this we can see that, living in and out of gratitude by definition means living in relationships. We give thanks to God, and to others. We are grateful for God and for others. It has been said that ingratitude is at the root of our difficulty in loving God beyond fear and guilt, and in loving others freely.² Living in gratitude, living out of gratitude frees us to love God and others, and to live in the abundance of grace God promised through the Spirit: The grace that enables us and empowers us to live in gratitude. I can’t explain it but I know it to be true, the more we live in that grace, the more we practice gratitude the more we will be stirred to give...of ourselves, our time, our talents, our money...and the more we give...the deeper our gratitude. It’s a wonderful, amazing cycle!

So, how are we going to celebrate Thanksgiving this year...I encourage you to join me in practicing gratitude...from the dawn of the day to the time the sun sets...and then perhaps the next day, and the one after that as well, perhaps every day leading to and through Christmas and even into the New Year... let’s “give thanks *in* all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you!”

1. Leddy, Mary Jo, Radical Gratitude, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2003 p7
2. Ibid, page 6