

“Grief and Thanksgiving”

November 18, 2018

“Good Grief?” series

First of all, Hello! Since retiring from active ministry last June, I am discovering that even much-anticipated events can bring a sense of loss and the accompanying grief which attends every loss in our lives. Every change and relocation bring with it challenges. Some changes we asked for and desired while others were not of our choosing.

Today’s scripture reminds us to “Give thanks in all circumstances.” Notice that it does not say “for all circumstances” but rather, “In all circumstances.” This means both the things we chose as well as the changes that were thrust upon us without our consent.

This week, as we celebrate Thanksgiving, we are mindful that not everything will be the same. There may be empty seats around the table because someone we love is missing. Geographic changes in the family may mean that not everyone can gather the way they used to.

Temptation may lead us to not celebrate Thanksgiving at all because we just can’t handle it. The changes and loss may feel like it’s just too much. In some cases that may be okay. Give yourself permission to not expect to feel like celebrating or at least not to do all the same things. On the other hand, it may be time to adapt and give thanks in new ways. We are to hold on and give thanks anyways, in whatever our circumstance because even when we are hurting, we have people and things to for which to be grateful.

Things change but love is eternal and can never be lost. Here in this Body of Christ you have friends that are like family, who will continue to walk this journey with you, even when things are different. And above all, the love of God in Christ Jesus is relentless and will continue to heal and transform hearts even when bodies give way and things change.

The scripture we are studying today is the oldest piece of Christian literature, written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica (in Macedonia or what we know as Greece today.) This would have been around the year 50 C.E., some 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and about 20 years before the first Gospel, Mark, was written. It is believed that this early church was made up mostly of people that had been Gentiles, rather than Jews, and Paul had grown quite fond of them. He refers to them as brothers and sisters time after time. While Paul wished to return to them, it was not possible, so he sent Timothy to work among them and encourage them. This is the letter Paul sent after Timothy had reported upon their progress. As with most letters, we don’t have the original report or questions to which Paul is responding so we must imagine the scene.

From history we know that in the Roman Empire to be a Christian was a dangerous thing, at least until the year 313 C.E. when Constantine decriminalized Christianity. So, when Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, their very existence as a body of believers was threatened. The world they lived in was filled with challenges, lacking the security and freedoms we take for granted today. And yet, there is much we can learn and benefit from this letter which was written to those living in a pre-Christian world, if we take it to heart as Christians now living in a post-Christian world.

Paul's letter is instructions in how to be faithful people, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, living together in community, even when the world around them feels uncertain and sometimes dangerous. Sound familiar?

We need to learn these same lessons today, heeding these timeless words that are as true now as they were then. This will help us navigate the treacherous waters of change and keep us true to our calling as followers of Jesus. Let's examine this passage and see how we are doing.

¹² *"Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.*

¹³ *Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."* The fact that I am here today and your pastor, Mary, is having a much-deserved break, tells me that you care that she gets rest and time to be with old friends. Bravo to this church for caring for their pastor. My experience tells me that this does not always happen, and pastors find it difficult to take time off for self-care. Keep up the good work, Lake Harbor!

The next line says: "Live in peace with each other." Lately, we in America haven't done a very good job with this. We have focused more on what divides us than on what we share in common. This is true in the church as well. As we move forward in 2019, please remember this directive and do whatever it takes to love one another the way Jesus loves each and every one – no matter how different they are. Living in peace requires patience and understanding. That's probably why Paul says this next:

"And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

There is a timelessness about this, isn't there?! Must be that even back then there were those who sat on the sidelines and criticized the work being done by the 20%. You know what I mean. It happens everywhere! Consider this your warning if you are one of the complainers who sit at the sidelines grumbling to others about the work being done to try to keep our churches growing and vital. Everybody wants young people and kids, but God forbid we change anything to adapt!

Change will happen, and we may need to grieve what we miss, but we must keep our eye on the purpose of loving God and one another more than we love the old ways. Making idols of the old ways is dangerous. It separates us from each other and from God.

And to those who have labored long and hard to lead in times of change, don't give up. "Encourage the disheartened." I've been there. It's not fun. Take heart that God is speaking ideas into your heart not just to see you get beat up once again, but that you will finally reach that new person and God will be made real for them for maybe the first time.

"Help the weak" requires great stamina on your part. The fact that they are weak means they need to draw strength from you. If you have failed to maintain your spiritual strength through prayer and study of the scriptures, then what you pour out into the weak will leave you depleted and in danger of becoming disheartened. It happened in the early church and it happens now. Spend plenty of time listening to God. This will help with the next part. "Be patient with everyone."¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else."

This is tough! Words like "everyone" and "nobody" are broad and inclusive. Do we have that much power? We can't control the world, but we can start with ourselves and encourage our sphere of influence – our families, our children, our church family, to follow the example of patience and doing good for each other. This behavior will have far reaching effects like ripples on the water. Sometimes doing what is good for the other requires sacrifice on our part. That's when the rubber meets the road. That's when our character as a Christian is revealed.

"Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray continually,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." It is God's will for us who are followers of Christ Jesus to be able to give thanks in all circumstances. Not just when things have gone our way. Not just when we have had a perfect year and are perfectly happy, but even when...

You can fill in your own "even when." A person of faith is able to find something to give thanks and rejoice over. Even when something else has caused difficulty, God shines light into our lives in other ways. Even when, we find the strength to hold on and keep going, because God is faithful and will never let go of us. Our strength is in the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.