

“In Everything”
July 26, 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

If we did a quick “Family Feud” style survey of the people who are watching this worship service on YouTube, asking each person to come up with one word that best describes how they are feeling these days, I suspect a lot of us would come up with similar words. Here are a few of the words I envision near the top of our list.

I’m guessing at the very top would be some version of the word “tired”. Exhausted, overwhelmed, bored, sleepless. We’re tired of this pandemic. We’re tired of watching the numbers of cases rise with no seeming end in sight. We’re tired of waiting for a vaccine and watching the same reruns on TV. We’re tired of isolating and social distancing, tired of changes in our daily routines, tired of not being able to safely see family members and friends.

For people considered essential workers, I have no doubt “tired” aptly describes what it’s been like to work non-stop through this pandemic. Then again, I know more than a few people who are tired because they haven’t been able to go to work over these last few months...especially people who like what they do for a living and find meaning and fulfillment in their chosen vocation. People who can’t work on account of personal health issues or because they’ve been laid off or because their businesses are closed.

Right there with the word “tired” would likely be some variation of the word “anxious”? Stressed, afraid, worried, nervous. Parents who are trying to figure out whether to send their kids back to a classroom in a little over a month. Children and youth and college students who don’t know what to expect this fall and will be learning with an entirely new set of guidelines and behavior expectations. Teachers who have to assess whether they can risk going back to the classroom. And then figure out how to make classrooms effective while worried about their own health and well-being.

People who have loved ones in nursing homes or hospitals or loved ones living in hotspots around our country or our world. If case numbers continue to spike and a second COVID-19 wave comes at some point not far down the road, I imagine the word “anxious” will be an understatement. People who are struggling to make ends meet and pay their bills. People who need medical care and wonder whether hospitals will have adequate bed spaces for them. Not to mention the rise in mental health issues and the increase in domestic violence and child abuse cases as a result of this pandemic.

Yes, we’re tired. We’re anxious. Asked to put our feelings into words and some of us are sad. While some of us are lonely. Some of us are angry and frustrated. While some of us are surprised we are where we are. Some of us might use phrases. For example, these months have been noteworthy on account of some self-improvement or family improvement or home improvement. And perhaps some among us might lift up words like “hopeful” or “creative” to characterize these past few months.

I'd venture to guess, however, there is at least one word which probably wouldn't make our survey. And it's the word "thankful". If you and I look back over these recent months and take a few moments to think about how we might summarize our overall feelings or how we have felt at various points along the way, would any of us come up with the statement, "I am thankful?"

If "thankfulness" doesn't come to mind right around now, then this morning's choice of Scripture lesson may appear to be an odd choice. However, the Apostle Paul doesn't believe in selective reading of Scripture. He wouldn't buy in to the idea that we can pick and choose Scripture we like in accordance with whatever we think or feel.

Which leads us to Paul's directive this morning. During my sermon last Sunday, I focused on one verse in Paul's Letter to the Philippians. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." This morning, I want to similarly focus on one verse in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. In verse eighteen it says, "give thanks in all circumstances."

Even in the best of times, it's hard to imagine how we put everything on our thanksgiving list. All the more so during a time of crisis and struggle like this one. If you and I are being honest with ourselves and with God, there are some things for which we simply don't want to be thankful. Thankful for all the good things? That part isn't hard. But thankful when we're tired and anxious and restless and nothing is quite working the way it's supposed to? Much tougher...

In any case, there are times when we look closely at the Bible and one single word makes all the difference. And that truism applies in verse eighteen. The verse in question doesn't actually say, "give thanks **FOR** all circumstances." Instead, verse eighteen says, "give thanks **IN** all circumstances." (1)

The word "for" refers to your outcomes. It's about cause and effect. On the other hand, the word "in" refers to your situation. It's about location.

Verse eighteen isn't telling us that we have to give thanks **for** every circumstance that arises and to be honest, that's a relief. Because some circumstances don't feel good, emotionally, physically, spiritually or any way. Rather, the point the Apostle Paul is trying to make in verse eighteen, I believe, is that we ought to be able to give thanks to God regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves.

There are three main reasons why Paul reaches this conclusion. (2) The first, and most obvious reason why we give thanks in every circumstance is because God is always there with us. No matter where we are. If we are the only one there or we're with other people. Regardless of the severity of the situation, you and I are never completely by ourselves. When our lives reach their highest pinnacles and when our lives sink to their lowest depths and all the places in between, God promises to be right there with us...never leaving or forsaking us...beside us, within us, surrounding us at every turn.

The second reason why we're able to give thanks in every circumstance? Not only is God with us in everything, we can also bring everything to God. There is nobody I know in this world who is truly an open book. There are some things about my life, for instance, that I'd rather not share with anyone else. It's too embarrassing. It's too humiliating. I'm worried that other people might judge me, fairly or unfairly, if they know everything there is to know about me.

But God created us and God searches us and knows every part of us. There is no hiding from God and there are no secrets we can keep from God. Maybe that sounds a little too vulnerable or a little too intimidating, yet here's the good thing. If God knows exactly who you are and who I am, we can bare our souls about anything we want. We can seek out Jesus and tell him or ask him whatever is in our heart or on our mind without hesitation. You and I can't reveal to God something about ourselves that God isn't already aware of. Nor can you and I share something with Jesus that he won't be able to hear. There is a good deal of gratitude being able to trust that somebody knows us as well as we know ourselves...good and bad...and loves and forgives us no matter what.

Finally, we can give thanks to God in every circumstance because we trust God to handle what you and I cannot. When we reach our human limits and bump up against our human shortcomings. When we feel helpless and hopeless and we can't see a way out of a predicament. When we hit a wall and we can't go one step further, we can hand our burdens to God and invite God to find a way for us.

If God can form the heavens and the earth and all living things. If God can intervene throughout human history to save human beings from their own worst impulses. If God can raise God's own son from the grave on Easter morning. Then God can convert us and shape us and transform us. And God can carry us to a new day...

We can be thankful in every circumstance because God is there with us. Because there's nothing we can share with God that God doesn't already recognize and understand. And because God can find a way forward even when you and I can't see the way with our own eyes.

The word "thankful" might not be the first word that comes to mind right now in the midst of this ongoing pandemic. Yet even in these days, as tired and anxious and lonely and annoyed and bored as we might feel, we put our faith in God, who is greater than any pandemic. And we trust with gratitude that God is working hard to lead us through...and beyond. Amen.

- (1) Rev. Alan V. Ragland, "The Therapy of Unconditional Thanksgiving." As found in the Summer 2009 edition (Volume 12, Number 3) of *The African American Pulpit*, pgs. 85-87.
- (2) Ibid.

