

## **Thanks Living** (Deuteronomy 1:20-33; Matthew 6:25-33; Philippians 4:4-7)

Last Sunday afternoon I attended a prayer group. Part of the lesson focused on grumbling. Then I attended another prayer group Tuesday evening. And, talk about coincidences, once again, the scripture for the day warned about slipping into grumbling. Nonetheless, with two lessons on grumbling so fresh in my mind, guess what I found myself doing Wednesday? That's right--grumbling. I wasn't getting enough sleep. I couldn't get the newsletter done. Technology wasn't working. I didn't get to go to the holiday Luncheon Out. I had a flat tire. The flat tire couldn't be fixed. I had to buy a new tire. It was cold and rainy. Nothing that would prevent the kingdom, nothing that major, but how easily and quickly I slipped into grumbling.

We do that, don't we? When things don't go exactly the way we expect or want them to, when people or life don't treat us the way we think we should be treated, we grumble.

God is well aware of this tendency we humans have to grumble. After all, he's had thousands of years to witness it. One of the most vivid examples of this, though, was when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. God had worked those 10 amazing miracles to free them from bondage in Egypt, and he had taken care of them in their wilderness wandering. But when he told them to go take possession of the land he was giving them, they were "unwilling to go" and "rebelled against the command of the Lord." They "grumbled" in their tents and said, "The people (in this new land) are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven!" Moses told the people, "Have no dread or fear of them. The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you....But in spite of this, you have no trust in the Lord your God, who goes before you on the way to seek out a place for you to camp...to show you the route you should take" (Deuteronomy 1:29-33). And what a statement God made then about grumbling. God said that because of their grumbling, the people wouldn't be allowed to enter the promised land.

Jesus also pointed out how bad it is to grumble. He spoke unfavorably of those workers in the vineyard who grumbled against the landowner, who was representative of God. And in his Sermon On The Mount, Jesus lifted up a better way of living than grumbling. Jesus said, do not grumble, "do not worry about your

life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25). Then Jesus pointed out that grumbling won't accomplish anything positive. And he encouraged us to remember that just as God takes care of the birds and the flowers, so too he'll take care of us. So we should have faith that God is with us, knows what we need, and will take care of us.

And these weren't just words or thoughts for Jesus. In other words, Jesus practiced what he preached. Just think about the most difficult moment of Jesus' life, the night when he was facing his arrest and death. Jesus had every reason to grumble about what God was asking of him, about what a short life he was going to have, about how most people wouldn't even appreciate his sacrifice. But Jesus knew that grumbling wouldn't accomplish anything positive. And he remembered that just as God takes care of the birds and the flowers, so too God would take care of him. So he had faith that God was with him, knew what he needed in his hour of need, and would take care of him. Thus, instead of grumbling that night, Jesus was able to give thanks. As scripture tells us, "and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (I Corinthians 11:24).

Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul had lots he could have grumbled about. As he himself wrote, "to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:7-10). Paul could have grumbled about his physical problem, the Lord not healing him, weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. But Paul understood that grumbling wouldn't accomplish anything positive. And he remembered that just as God takes care of the birds and the flowers, so too God would take care of him. So he had faith that God was with him, knew what he needed, and would take care of him. Thus, instead of putting his energy into grumbling, Paul put his energy into telling others about God's love, all the while trusting that God would take care of him.

And aware of God's presence, and trusting in his care, Paul, like Jesus, lived a thankful life. Paul's letters are full of thanksgiving. Paul thanked God for Jesus. He thanked God for the people around him. He was thankful for the victory he would have in living because of Jesus. He was thankful for the good impulses he saw in others. He was thankful for God's leadership in his life.

And Paul encouraged others to also live thankful lives. He preached, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (II Corinthians 3:17). He even told us to "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thessalonians 5:18).

According to Paul, it's the will of God that we give thanks in all circumstances. The life and words of Jesus and the stories such as today's Old Testament lesson agree. Indeed, from the beginning of the Bible to the end of the Bible, it's clear that it's God's will that we give thanks, and not grumble, in all circumstances. But why? Why is it so important that we live thankful lives?

It's not because God wants to give us something challenging to do. It's because God, who loves us, wants the best for us. And God knows that our lives are better when we live thankfully.

A few years ago a doctor (Dr. Nick Stinnett) at the University of Nebraska conducted a study called the "Family Strengths Research Project." The purpose of the study was to identify the qualities that make for strong families. The results of the study showed that a key ingredient in strong families is appreciation. In the strongest families, the family members don't grumble but rather express gratitude for each other, for the family, and in everyday living. The strongest families are the families that express the most gratitude--to God and to one another. In a similar study, another researcher looked into the effect of thankful living in the workplace. This study showed that people were happiest in their jobs when there was more praise than criticism--more gratitude than grumbling.

Giving thanks blesses the person who is thanked, and it transforms the person who gives thanks. It creates better relationships. It makes everyone happier. And it works the same everywhere, with everyone. Giving thanks may seem a very small

thing, but it creates the type of harmonious world that God intended. No wonder, then, we are to "give thanks in all circumstances." No wonder "this is the will of God" for us.

The Pilgrims understood this. The first winter in the new land was devastating for them. Half of them died. They could have grumbled about conditions in the new world. They could have grumbled about their loss of so many friends and loved ones. They could have grumbled about the hard work and primitive conditions. But they realized that grumbling wouldn't accomplish anything positive. And so they decided to give thanks--for God's presence in their lives; for the fact that they were still alive; for each other; for their new native American friends; for the food they had; for the faith they had that God would take care of them.

Abraham Lincoln also understood the importance of giving "thanks in all circumstances." That's why, in the midst of the Civil War, he made the national proclamation setting aside a day for Thanksgiving. In the Civil War, brother fought against brother. An estimated 620,000 soldiers died. The campaigning armies left destruction in their wake, particularly in the Southern states, where most of the fighting occurred. But obviously Lincoln understood knew that giving thanks has a transformative power. It leads to better relationships. It creates the type of harmonious world that God intended.

I know that this year, for many of us, it seems that there is little to be thankful for. Life can be very rough and tough and unfair. Some of you have lost your jobs and can't find another one. Some of you have seen your savings greatly cut. Some of you can't afford to go to the doctor or the dentist. Others of you have lost loved ones whom you miss terribly. Still others of you are in pain...or worrying about health issues. But, friends, giving thanks is not something we do only when everything is perfect. We are told not to give thanks FOR all circumstances but rather IN all circumstances.

If we center ourselves in the feeling of the moment, we will be up and down, and up and down, throughout our lives. But if we center ourselves in the knowledge that God loves us and is with us in all the moments of our lives, we have a foundation on which we can stand secure, something we can always express gratitude for. Our thanksgivings should rise, not because of the circumstances of our lives, whether they are good or bad, but rather, our thanksgivings should rise because of who God

is, because of the character of God, the nature of God--which is everlasting love and faithfulness.

There is an old story told about a far-off land that was ruled by a tyrant. This tyrant had an ironclad grip on all parts of his kingdom, except for one frustrating area. He was unable to destroy the people's belief in God. He summoned his counselors and put the question to them: "Where can I hide God so that the people will end up forgetting him?" One counselor suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. This proposal was debated for some time, but voted down because it was believed that one day scientists would discover a means of space travel and God would end being found again. Another advisor to the tyrant came up with the idea of burying God beneath the depths of the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason--it was felt that scientific advancement would lead to the discovery of God even beneath the depths of the ocean floor. Finally the oldest and wisest of the counselors had a flash of insight. "I know," he said, "why don't we hide God where no one will ever think of finding him?" He explained, "If we hide God in the ordinary events of people's everyday lives, they'll never find him." And so it was done--and they say that most people are still looking for God--even today.

But God is with us. That's what "Immanuel" means. He's hidden in plain sight--for those who have eyes and ears to recognize him. Furthermore, everything we have is a gift from God. God gave us our lives, the people in our lives, the world around us, the air we breathe. Not so long ago famous people all over the world were polled by a magazine which asked them the question "if you could be granted one wish that will come true right now, what would that be?" There were some very interesting responses. But one response impressed the magazine's editors so much that they commented on. That response was this, "I wish that I could be given an even greater ability to appreciate all that I already have." (Fairchild, Richard J., "Remembering To Give Thanks: Blessing God")

Not just this Thursday but each and every day, we are called to practice thanks living. We are called to replace our grumbling with gratitude. We are called to open our eyes and ears to all the signs of God's loving, caring presence within us, within others, within the world--hidden in ordinary happenings and people. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 22, 2009