

## *THANKSGIVING AS OVERCOMING*

I Thessalonians 5.13b-18

November 18, 2018, Pledge/Gratitude Sunday

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I Thessalonians 5.13b-17 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

Live in peace with each other. We urge you, sisters and brothers, to warn the idlers, cheer up the fainthearted, support the weak, and be patient with everyone. Make sure that no one repays evil with another. Always seek what is good for each other – and for all people. Rejoice always, pray constantly.

I Thessalonians 5.18 (NRSV)

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

[Anthem: *Laudate Pueri* by W.A. Mozart]

How's your Latin this morning?

*Laudate* you probably recognize as “praise:” to *laud* something. Some of you know that the encyclical Pope Francis wrote about care for the earth in 2015 was *Laudate Si*, “praise to you.” The idea being that environmental action is grounded in praise to our Creator with gratitude for the gift of life we share with all creatures and with the earth itself.

*Pueri* you might not recognize. It's “children” – which makes it the perfect anthem to come between Youth Sunday last week and the pledge of our gratitude this morning.

I left worship last Sunday grateful for our families and teachers and our congregation and for our children and youth. If there is anything that could take the edge off my despair about the future, it's them – their clear voices, their awareness of who they are in the world, Ben's story about standing shoulder to shoulder with friends in the face of loss.

They reminded me that “we shall overcome” is not just a promise. It’s a commitment we make to one another and the world.

*Laudate pueri.*

But, of course, *pueri* is not a demographic. It’s not all the people below a certain age. *Pueri* is the relationship we have with one another as children of God. And recognizing that relationship and giving thanks for it can overcome a lot of things.

*Laudate Pueri* is Mozart’s musical reflection on Psalm 113:

*Praise be to God!*

*Praise, O children of God ...*

*From the rising of the sun*

*to its setting*

*the name of God is to be praised ...*

And in that praise and thanksgiving, something happens:

*God raises the poor from the dust [Psalm 113 says]*

*and lifts the needy from the ash heap,*

*to make them sit with princes,*

*with the leaders of God’s people.*

*God gives the childless woman a home [and those of you who know something about that culture, know that childless women were women who could never be assured of a place] –*

*God gives the childless woman a home,  
making her the joyous mother of children.*

In other words, the children of God are those who recognize praise and thanksgiving as something that overcomes the distance we create between those who have and those who have not. It overcomes our ideas about who counts and who doesn’t. Praise and thanksgiving remind us of who are and how we relate one another.

So that famous line in I Thessalonians – “In everything give thanks” – comes at the end of a list of instructions that begin with “live in peace with each other.” And then it goes on to say that we should warn those who are the “idlers” – those who are wasting the gift of their lives – and to cheer up the fainthearted and support the weak and be patient with everyone and do not squander the gift of your own lives by wasting time on those plans for revenge. “Always seek what is good for each other – and for all people; rejoice always; pray constantly [because you’re going to need it]; and in everything give thanks.”

So, like *Laudate Pueri* (aka Psalm 113), the passage in I Thessalonians talks about praise and thanksgiving in the context of relationships because our lives depend on a web of relationships that we rarely see – that we *never* see without the eyes of gratitude.

While the German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sat in a Nazi concentration camp, he wrote:

*In normal life one is not at all aware that we always receive infinitely more than we give, and that gratitude is what enriches life. One easily overestimates the importance of one’s own acts and deeds, compared with who we become only through other people.*

At the Diaconate meeting on Thursday night, I asked folks to complete this sentence: I wouldn’t be here, if it weren’t for ...

And by “here,” I don’t just mean this physical place. I mean the “here” of this place in my life that goes beyond my own capacities to make things happen. I mean the “here” of whatever moment of grace I am standing in. I mean the “here” of opportunities that, on my own, I could never manufacture. I mean “here” as in the startling awareness of my own existence.

I wouldn’t be here, if it weren’t for ...

Once you start making that list, it quickly becomes endless.

Somehow, sitting in a concentration camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to see something that most of us miss – that “we always receive infinitely more than we give,” and that we have given ourselves more credit than we deserve for the life we have become through other people.

Sometimes in our normal lives we get a glimpse.

Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Grateful*, tells the story of her little dog, Rembrandt. Rembrandt was lost on “one of the four hottest days in the history of Memphis.” Bass and her husband searched for him; made calls; hung up signs.

*I could not imagine [Bass writes] my beloved dog dying, starving and alone. Through several difficult years of my own life, including graduate school, losing my job, and getting divorced, Rembrandt had been my most faithful companion. I could not sleep. I could not stop crying.*

And then the phone call came. Rembrandt had been seen, “stumbling down a street, suffering from dehydration.” They took him to the vet and finally, “beat up and exhausted,” Rembrandt came home.

Bass says that she laughed and cried and scolded the poor dog while she kept saying:

*Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I was speaking to the dog, my neighbors, my husband and God all at the same time. All my feelings of fear and grief were overwhelmed – were overcome – by a far more powerful emotion: gratitude.*

Gratitude begins to create that endless list of gifts that overcomes our sense of isolation and self-sufficiency and fear about our own existence.

Gratitude for our youth last Sunday overcame, for a powerful few moments, my despair about the future.

According to Psalm 113 and I Thessalonians 5, gratitude can overcome the distances we create between ourselves and others.

Diana Butler Bass' fear and grief were overcome by gratitude for that wide web of relationships that brought her beloved dog home.

But what if Rembrandt had not come home? What then?

Latter in her book, Bass says that she had a classmate at her Christian college who had a poster hanging in her bathroom with the words of I Thessalonians "emblazoned" on it:

*Rejoice always,  
pray without ceasing,  
give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God  
in Christ Jesus for you.*

"Honestly," Bass writes, "I always wanted to rip [that poster] off the wall ...

*I was secretly full of fury at injustice, not only the injustice I had suffered, but the larger agonies and evils endured by people less fortunate than even my own sorry self ... Telling victims to be grateful for trauma, violence, or abuse only wounds those who have suffered and empowers perpetrators ... Feeling thankful might just have to wait.*

I have been well aware that I would be talking about gratitude as the fires in California rage on, taking lives and destroying property. I can't imagine what Thanksgiving means for them. I'm thinking that feeling thankful will just have to wait.

There is a timing to gratitude, I think. And sometimes it has to wait. It's like talking with a person who is living in domestic violence and having that person be consumed by questions about forgiveness – shouldn't I forgive? How do I forgive? What does forgiveness mean?

If someone is living in domestic violence, questions about forgiveness have to wait. First, get out. Second, take back your life. Third, find people you can trust. Fourth, be grateful for those people. And then, somewhere down the road, we can start thinking about what forgiveness might look like for you.

Bass says:

*Gratitude cannot and should not be forced or faked, and it is never appropriate to cover up or deny abuse or excuse injustice. Indeed, gratitude as a placebo can be another form of abuse that silences those in deep pain with false notions of forgiveness, happiness, and well-being.*

Sometimes feeling thankful has to wait.

Back in the day, there was a famous theologian who also wrote sermons. His name was Paul Tillich and wrote a sermon on this text from I Thessalonians 5 that, in everything, we should give thanks. He says: *There are no limits to giving thanks in the whole of creation – in that web of relationships that has brought us “here.” But, he says, are there not limits in our life? Can we honestly give thanks for the frustrations, accidents, and diseases that strike us? We CANNOT in the moment when they take hold of us. Here is one of the many situations where piety can degenerate into dishonesty. For we rightly resist such evils. We want to remove them ... and there are depths of suffering, bodily and mental, in which even the question of thanking or not thanking does not appear ... and I believe that at some time in our lives all of us have had experiences that were nothing but evil when they happened, but that became good later and the object of honest thanks.*

If I'm honest, when I look back now, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for that endless stream of people and forces and those seeds of goodness that were planted in some really rotten times of my life.

Gratitude is one of the ways we overcome simply writing off the past as a lost cause or series of failures that has pre-determined the course of my future.

And that's important because gratitude isn't only about where we are now or how we remember the past. It's also about how we come to imagine the future.

See, if it's gratitude for our young people that helps me overcome my despair in the present, it is gratitude for some of our older folks that inspires me to imagine a future that overcomes the regret of the past.

I know people who come to the end of their lives with disappointments and hurt that steep into a brew of bitterness. I don't want that to be me. I want *Laudate Pueri*.

I want to imagine all the ways that my life turned out to be infinitely more gifted than I had the capacity to give.

I want to go out with "thank you" on my lips.

Because, in the end, as Anne Lamott says:

*We are haunted by our failures and mortality. And yet the world keeps on spinning, and in our grief, rage, and fear a few people keep on loving us and showing up ... Awful stuff happens and beautiful stuff happens, and it's all part of the big picture. In the face of everything, we slowly come through ... We come to know – or reconnect with – something rich and okay about ourselves. And at some point, we cast our eyes to the beautiful skies, above all the crap we're wallowing in, and we whisper, "Thank you."*

That's what I want: the gratitude that overcomes regret for the past; the taken-for-grantedness of the present; and the bitterness of the future.

As our young people taught us last Sunday, "we shall overcome" is not just a promise. It's a commitment we make.

So today, if you hear that voice – that whisper of “thank you” deep in your soul – for your sake, for the world’s sake, for God’s sake, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The Bonhoeffer quote is in Diana Butler Bass’ *Grateful: The Transformative Power Of Giving Thanks* HarperOne, 2018), p.xx; Rembrandt’s story is pp.3-5; the poster story is pp.37-38. Paul Tillich’s sermon, “In Everything Give Thanks,” is in *The Eternal Now* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), p.180-181. Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow* (Riverhead Books, 2012), p.51.