

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, May 19, 2019**

**Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

**A Courageous Gratitude!**

St. Paul when he was chained all day to a Roman soldier wrote these words: "Give thanks always for all things to God."

"The light shines in darkness; and the darkness is not able to put it out." Said St. John (1:5.)  
St. Paul was a light in that prison.

William Law once wrote, "If anyone could tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing... you could not do more for yourself than by this thankful spirit; for it turns all that it touches into happiness."

Is it possible to be thankful for everything as St. Paul teaches or is this just naivety?  
Are we as hard pressed as the little boy at school who was supposed to say what he was thankful for at Thanksgiving. After he had thought and thought he said: "I am thankful that I'm not a turkey."

Truth to tell we are incredibly blessed here in Canada. Most of us are grateful for the food we eat, good friends, family, loved ones, health and vitality and even although the 1% get richer and the poor get poorer a great deal of abundance remains. We don't cue up in food lines for food as in Venezuela. There is an abundance in our supermarkets. There are many, many wonderful things about living in Canada often rated as one of the top places to live in our troubled world.

But most of us are not happy with the way the rest of the world is going. On the world stage there is a lot of belligerence and bullying going on. And we are still mostly sleep walking when it comes to climate change and doing something about it.

Underneath it all for many of us there is this unease, this knowing that all is not well. We have a nameless dread that anything might happen to us. There is a dearth of good news.

With this dread snapping at our heels can we really get into giving thanks for everything as St. Paul urges us to do?

How do we even get there and why should we bother? Why not just grin and bear it? When things are bad why would we even want to be thankful? Isn't this counter intuitive in the extreme?

History is a great thing to remember at times like these, for things have been much worse than we are experiencing today. This week I came across the history of the writing of my favorite hymn. The thirty years war in Europe was one of the darkest times in European history. There was ongoing violence, pillage, famine and finally the plague. In one year pastor Rinkart officiated over nearly 5 thousand funerals. Here is the history: German pastor Martin Rinkart served in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. The fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four pastors in Eilenburg. But one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkart officiated at the funerals of the other two. As the only pastor left, he often conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day—some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died.

What was Pastor Rinkart reaction to all this death?

One evening Pastor Rinkart wrote down the following words for his motherless children to offer as a grace to be said after a meal:

Now thank we all our God

With hearts and hands and voices;

Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom this world rejoices.  
Who, from our mother's arms,  
Hath led us on our way,  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.

As I read about this faithful man of God, I thought to myself, now that is faith, incredible faith, however do we get there?

When Robert Schuller was a child there was a dustbowl in Iowa. His father would normally harvest 100 wagon loads of corn but that year the harvest was a meager one half wagon load. Schuller writes: "I will never forget it. Seated at the Thanksgiving dinner table with his calloused hands holding ours my father looked up and thanked God. He said: "I thank you God that I have lost nothing. For I have regained the seed I have planted in the springtime" Schuller says that his father said "Never count up 'the might have beens' or you'll be defeated. Never look at what you have lost, look at what you have left. Thank God for everything that happens to you."

I once had the privilege of meeting psychologist Wayne Dyer and having some time with him. On the night he came to my church in Stratford he told the story of his father and his gratitude for him. He said; "Perhaps the single most significant person in my life, the one person who made the greatest difference for me and my own spiritual development, is a person who by all accounts was a petty tyrant. He abandoned his family, spent time in prison as a criminal and was abusive towards his wife. At the age of 49 he died from the excessive use of alcohol. Dyer says what he learned from his father was what he had to transcend. When Dyer found himself slipping into behaviors that destroyed his father's life, he reminded himself that was not his path. Interestingly he was grateful for his father's negative example because it served as a mechanism to keep his own life on track.

Dyer says: "All people, and I do mean all people are in your life to teach you valuable lessons... get the message, give thanks, move on."

What is your reaction to these statements about giving thanks in everything? Do you still have honest doubts like me? Let's work at this a little more... there is something interesting that we should all know... there are health implications for not being grateful for everything.

According to the best research, we get better by seeking peace and letting go of our responses of fear and anger. Gratefulness does that faster than anything else, so perhaps gratitude as a reaction to adversity is not quite so crazy after all? Is that why pastor Rinkhart survived when all around him fell like flies? Was it his faith in God and giving thanks for everything that happened to him that gave him a resilient immune system? Worth thinking about.

Here is another point. We know that it is not possible to absolutely know the future, even although we might hazard good guesses. But note this: if we give thanks for everything that happens to us in the present, we pave the way for accepting things in the future. For in the future it may come about that, the thing that we were upset about may actually be a blessing in disguise. Present suffering may lead to future blessing.

Not everything we think of as loss may in the end be so.

Like that person you might have married, and you know now that it would have been a disaster!

Or that investment you wanted to make that seemed like such a good idea at the time and your spouse talked you out of it and now you are more than grateful that he/she did because the bottom fell out of the market?

What about that job that you thought that you had to have, and it turned out that the person who took it failed because of circumstances beyond her control and the business folded? Have you ever said, 'There but for the grace of God go I' and been profoundly grateful? I have many times in my life...

Why does gratitude work? Because when we give gratitude for negative things to God, we are releasing them and all the stress that goes with it. We also do not go down into the mire of victim hood where we are of no use to anyone else. Instead we can maintain a positive can/do attitude, if we are grateful.

Once a tornado touched down on the Schuller farm. The family only had enough time to get into their car and drive for their lives! They lost everything- all 9 buildings were gone including the farmhouse. Everything they had worked for years... gone. Once again father Schuller gave thanks to God saying. "I thank-you God that not a life was lost."

Father Schuller went into town and bought an old house that was to be demolished. They took it apart board by board and rebuilt it over the basement of the previous home. By refusing to be a victim old man Schuller taught his son that gratitude can be the greatest can/do energizer of them all.

Schuller learned from his father well. Joyce Brothers once told me: "I admire Robert Schuller greatly. When I first knew him, his church was in a drive-in movie theatre. Even then he told me that one day he was going to build a glass cathedral. Now look at him. He did everything he said he would. He is truly amazing!"

What Joyce perhaps did not know was the family history; of Schuller's father who insisted on giving thanks to God for everything- no exceptions!

There is one more point I want you to take home on this interesting idea of being grateful for everything that has happened to you no matter what.

What is it that lies behind giving thanks for all things that is the pearl of great price? What is the gift that sustains them all, the gift behind all gifts for which we can be thankful no matter what?

Executive coach Jan Thompson Eve from San Diego lost her husband to cancer after a long fight. She decided to go to a health spa. There she was surrounded by beauty, but she was sad of heart. It was the Thanksgiving holiday in the US, and she could not imagine spending it with anyone she knew so she deliberately surrounded herself with strangers. Giving thanks was completely beyond her. She felt like a burned-out survivor of war after the long care giving experience with her dying husband. She was 54 years old and for her the future looked completely bleak.

She asked the concierge if there was anyone at the Spa who had recently lost a husband. The concierge replied that the director of the Spa had lost her husband several months before.

Jan sat down with Phyllis the director at lunch and they began to talk. Phyllis spoke about her husband and Jan could tell by her stories that the relationship had been happy and warm. When it came to her turn she could only cry quietly as she related her husband's battle with cancer and chronic pain.

Jan asked Phyllis what she had done to cope with the crushing grief. Obviously, she had been doing something right because she was so full of vitality and joy after such a short time. Phyllis had described her travels around the world with such sparkling eyes and her plans for next year bubbled out of her.

Jan noted silently the complete contrast between her and Phyllis and so she asked her the question uppermost in her own mind: "Did you ever feel like you were just waiting to die? I don't mean suicide. I just mean feeling like you were just going through the motions with no future and no purpose."

Phyllis said emphatically: "No, never!"

Then she shared that she had lived in Java as a little girl where her father was a Shell Oil exec. One day the Japanese came to the door and took him away with a bayonet in his back. Her mother, little Phyllis and her young brother were all taken to a Japanese prison camp. They all but died there of starvation. Everyday Phyllis' mother said to her: "They can take away our food and our freedom, but they cannot take away our love of life. If we let them do that they have won." "And that is why, said Phyllis, as awful as it was to lose my husband and have to go on without him, I will never lose my love of life."

Jan felt a rush of awareness inside... a recognition that this was a deciding point of her life. Phyllis had been through so much more than she, yet she had chosen to fully live her life! Two images flashed before her of the

way she could be: An inspiring happy, thankful woman, whose heart was filled with joy and peace, or a woman in a cocoon, sitting on the sidelines, full of sorrow, not really living but merely existing.

What had Jan discovered? The pearl of great price, the gift behind all gifts- she could always, no matter what happened, be grateful for the gift of her life and learn to love life, no matter what it threw her way. She had discovered courageous gratitude!

You and I can do this. It is a decision that we can make, plain and simple: to be grateful for everything that comes our way, good or bad. This is a decision to continue to trust God rather than giving in to despair. It is faith in the goodness of the world as a place for making our souls. It is a decision to believe what the poet Robert Frost taught us:

“Earth's the right place for love:

I don't know where it's likely to go better.”

It is a decision to believe as Satre taught us, “that hope begins on the other side of despair.”

As Lord Tennyson's aging Ulysses said:

“Come, my friends,

'T is not too late to seek a newer world.

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

If we move forward as individuals and live our lives with courageous gratitude, we will be able to give thanks always/ for everything/ to God/.

Then where we touch the world. there will be points of light,  
that shine in the darkness, lights which the darkness cannot put out.