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Sermon: October 22, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ALWAYS, CONTINUALLY, IN ALL ...”
First Thessalonians 5:16-18

☑ One Thursday in 2014 I tuned the car radio to a Christian station and heard, **“What if all you had today was what you thanked God for yesterday?”** It gave me pause. Had this occurred I would have been destitute, since my prayers of gratitude the previous day had been brief, vague, and perfunctory.

☑ That Saturday I thumbed through a random magazine in a waiting room. This statement jumped out: **“The one thing all joyful people have in common is gratitude.”** Research proves that thankfulness can break the grip of anger, resentment, and anxiety, freeing us to experience joy.

☑ The following Monday I finished rereading The Hiding Place. Corrie and Betsie ten Boom were imprisoned in Ravensbrück, a Nazi camp where up to 90,000 women died. The first time they were marched into their barrack Betsie insisted that they give thanks **“for every single thing about”** it – including the fleas. Corrie wrote:

This was too much. “Betsie, there’s no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.”

“‘Give thanks in all circumstances,’ she quoted. [I Thessalonians 5:18] doesn’t say, ‘in pleasant circumstances.’ Fleas are a part of this place where God has put us.”

And so we stood between the piers of bunks and gave thanks for fleas. But this time I was sure Betsie was wrong.

I disagree that gratitude *in* all circumstances requires gratitude *for* all circumstances. It is one thing to give thanks *during* imprisonment in a concentration camp; it is quite another to give thanks *for* the twisted imaginations that build and operate such hellholes.

Having said that, Betsie was not wrong about the fleas. To their amazement, the sisters could freely hold prohibited prayer services and read aloud from their forbidden Bible while among the bunks.

Had they been caught the punishment would have been severe. Why were they safe? The Nazi guards were terrified to enter the sleeping areas because of the fleas.

Thursday, the radio snippet; Saturday, the magazine piece; Monday, The Hiding Place – every two days, the same message. Was it coincidence?!

☐ Please turn with me to I Thessalonians 5:16-18: **“Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray continually,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Sometimes, this comes easily: your boss gives you a hefty raise; a F5 tornado just misses your neighborhood; the test results are negative; the baby is born healthy. You find yourself praying, joyfully and without effort, *Thank you, Lord!*

Then there are the times when you don't get a cost of living increase, much less a raise; or the twister destroys your home; or the test results come back positive; or it's touch and go with the baby. Praying then is hard enough, never mind rejoicing and giving thanks.

But, as Betsie noted the text **“doesn't say, 'in pleasant circumstances.'”** The modifiers Paul uses are inseparable from the verbs: **“Rejoice *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*.”**

❓ How can we rejoice in the midst of our struggle with frailty and disease?

❓ How can we pray while our bodies are racked by pain?

❓ How can we give thanks when our souls are darkened by grief and disquieted by foreboding?

👉 Some respond with denial. They put on a happy face saying, in effect, 'I don't struggle. Pain cannot overcome me! My faith is stronger than anguish or anxiety.'

Their motto is 'Fake it till you feel it.' Ask, 'How are you?' and they will claim to be 'Too blessed to be stressed' – even if they are dying inside.

That used to be me. Then I came to very brink of suicide, God rescued me, and I started to live by his grace. The more fully I trusted his goodness, the freer I became to admit my problems.

👉 Others respond with despair. They get stuck in the struggle, wallow in the pain, and knuckle under to the anguish and anxiety.

Their motto is 'Life is hard, then you die.' Ask, 'How are you?' and they will reel off a litany of woes without the faintest glimmer of a silver lining.

Hey, I get it. I, too, have been tempted to let my problems define me, especially when I have been tormented by skin infections and cancer and kidney stones. Sometimes, I have given me.

Denial might appear to be beneficial. It is not. Despair might seem to be realistic. It is not.

Both extremes contradict reality. Hence, they are equally incompatible with discipleship. We cannot live in a settled state of denial or despair and faithfully, fruitfully follow Christ.

❓ This brings us right back to our questions: How can we truly rejoice, really pray, and sincerely give thanks?

Allow me to share three actions that have made rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving possible for me.

✍ First, live honestly.

Are wearing rose-colored glasses? Take them off and grieve freely. Are you wearing dark shades? Get rid of them and celebrate without reservation.

Do you think you should be awarded a raise, protected from a house fire, healed of cancer? There is no guarantee that Sovereign God will do it for you.

Do you expect all kinds of terrible things to happen? Even if they do, they will not negate the

myriad benefits our generous God has poured into your life.

☑ The last year and a half have been among the worst of my life. It has been one blow after another: itching, burning, swelling, pain, nausea, fatigue, cognitive impairment, uncertainty, depression. At times, the symptoms and side-effects have been excruciating.

☑ The last year and a half have been among the best of my life. It's been one blessing after another!

My Beloved Beth: You are an exemplary spouse! You model what it means to fulfill the marriage covenant with great faithfulness, patience, strength, sacrifice, and tenderness. You are God's best gift to me!

Precious daughters: You have brought me deep joy and lifted my spirits in the darkest moments. Thank you!

Dear Church family: You have given me unparalleled personal support in words (spoken and written) and in deed, with acts of service, gifts, and hugs. You have been steadfast partners in the ministry of the Gospel, stepping in to plan worship, fill the pulpit, and serve in other ways that I could not.

There is so much more! Early diagnosis; advanced treatments; doctors with great technical expertise who also listen and care; decent insurance coverage; good days that coincided with important family events; communication technology by which we can connect at a distance; safety while driving to and from appointments; and so forth.

This last year and a half have been among the worst of my life. They have also been among the best. When we

live honestly, rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are possible.

✍ Second, deal with anger and fear.

Momentary anger and fear can be a gift. Ideally, they alert us to the existence of some injustice or danger that needs to be addressed. (The same is true of pain, by the way.)

Long-term anger and continual fear are a curse. They fuel denial and despair.

When I push my anger and fear down, thereby denying them – and conversely when I fan them into flame, thus feeding my despair – I distract myself from rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving. Not only so, I rob myself of the energy I need to do them.

But when I constructively address anger and fear as they arise, my energy is renewed! It becomes easier to devote myself to rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving.

✍ Third, trust that God is good, kind, and powerful even when he allows us to be afflicted.

Denial and despair are opposite pitfalls, but both are failures of faith.

Denial lies. It says that to openly acknowledge outward hardship, or worse inward anguish, is to disparage God's virtues.

As if the Almighty needs us to cover for him by concealing what we falsely perceive as his failures!

Despair lies. It says that the experience of outward hardship or inward anguish disproves God's goodness and kindness and power.

As if those attributes are determined by our abundance and success and comfort!

? How can we intentionally choose trust?

- We can admit and repent of mistrust.
- We can ask God to fortify our confidence.
- We can celebrate personal experiences of the

Lord's providence and provision: make a list or journal about them; commemorate them at Thanksgiving, at the turn of the year, on your birthday, or whenever it makes sense;

- We can recall turning points in salvation history: the call of Abraham; the Exodus; the life and ministry of Jesus; crucial turning points in the Church era; and so on.

- We can tell others about God's goodness, kindness, and power. This makes it more real to us.

Choosing to trust God makes rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving possible.

“Rejoice *always*, pray *continually*, give thanks *in all circumstances*.” Sometimes, this comes easily. Often, it is like pulling teeth.

Regardless, **“this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”** It is possible. It is good. It is right.

First Thessalonians 5:16-18 is the word of the Lord.