

Thanks Any Way

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Deuteronomy 8:7-14 ¹² When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in ¹³ and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, ¹⁴ be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ¹⁶ Be joyful always, ¹⁷ pray at all times, ¹⁸ be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Mindful of God's generous blessings, we can be thankful in every circumstance.

It happened for me at least twice last week. On Tuesday, Detroit Road was filled with traffic. I wanted to turn left across traffic into a parking lot but faced the prospect of sitting forever as the endless line of traffic crept past me. Then the heaven's opened... or a gap in the traffic did, anyway. An oncoming motorist stopped just shy of the parking lot driveway instead of pulling up to the rear bumper of the car ahead of him. The gap he created in the stop-and-go traffic allowed me to turn in front of him into the parking lot.

Then on Wednesday, another motorist stopped, allowing me to pull out of a driveway and get in front of her in the line of traffic. It's a small thing, yes, but it sure makes life easier and often safer, doesn't it?

Often (but not always) I'm that "other driver" who will try to let the oncoming vehicle through or let them get in line in front of me. When you are that "other driver," what do you always look for after that small bit of kindness? I know I always look to see if the person I let in offers up what I call the "Rearview Mirror Wave." I know that they were glad I yielded to them in traffic. But the "Rearview Mirror Wave" tells me that, as simple and uncostly as it was, they recognized that what they'd just experienced was a gift. The wave tells me that they appreciated it and were grateful to anonymous me.

Our Thanksgiving Day observance is a reminder that we should offer the equivalent of a "Rearview Mirror Wave" not just when we're behind the wheel but always – yes, always! We aspire to our better nature when we remember to acknowledge the many and varied gifts that we experience through our years... in each day... in this very moment!

I came across a story that sounds almost too cute to be real, but supposedly it is. It involves the great writer and poet Rudyard Kipling, the Englishman who was born in India, lived in England, and eventually settled in the United States with his American-born wife. He wrote "The Jungle Book" while living in the U.S. Kipling was one of those fortunate authors who achieved literary and monetary success *during his lifetime*. As the story goes,

One time a newspaper reporter came up to him and said, "Mr. Kipling, I just read that somebody calculated that the money you make from your writings amounts to over a hundred dollars a word." Mr. Kipling raised his eyebrows and said, "Really? I certainly wasn't aware of that."

The reporter cynically reached down into his pocket and pulled out a one hundred dollar bill and gave it to Kipling and said, "Here's a hundred dollar bill, Mr. Kipling. Now, you give me one of your hundred dollar words." Mr. Kipling

looked at that hundred dollar bill for a moment, took it and folded it up and put it in his pocket and said, "Thanks."¹

"Thanks" probably isn't a hundred-dollar word or even a million-dollar word; its effect can be as priceless as the actions for which it is said in response.

Someone has said that for Thanksgiving to be real Thanksgiving, there must be "Thanks" and there must be "Giving." Thankfulness and generosity are like the chicken and the egg: which comes first? Or does it matter?

An experiment was done in New York's Central Park where an advertising firm dressed up [an actor] as a blind man and gave him a cup to collect money. One day they put a sign around his neck that read, "I'm blind." On that day he collected about \$4.00. The next day they dressed him the same way, placed him in the same place but changed the sign to read, "It's Spring and I'm blind." That day he collected nearly \$40.00. [What was different for the people who saw him the second day?] That day, those people realized how blessed they were by the beautiful flowers, birds, the sunrise and sunset.²

Their generosity was the result of their realization of how much they had to be thankful for, especially the so-called "little things" that they took for granted daily.

But let's face it. No one's life is perfect. No one's. Not that perfect family across the street with the quaint house and manicured lawn and three cars that are always clean and shiny. Not that perfect girl with the perfect complexion in that gorgeous dorm room at the end of the hall. When life is real, it includes tough times, sad times, scary times. You'd probably ask, "Jon, how are we supposed to be thankful about that? We're supposed to be thankful for life's dead-ends? The disappointments? Hardships and obstacles thrown in our way? The tragedies and sadnesses? Be thankful for those? That just doesn't make sense!"

And you'd be right. I agree that while we wouldn't be thankful FOR those challenges, we can remain thankful IN them. Imagine your daughter fell out of a tree and broke her arm. In that painful and scary time you can remain thankful that a neighbor was there to help her and call you; you can be thankful that a skilled doctor was able to set the arm and assure you that it would heal nicely.

We aren't expected to be thankful FOR all things, but we can remain thankful even IN all circumstances. That's what St. Paul was saying when he wrote in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 5, "Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances..."³ While we don't welcome adversity, we can be thankful that we have people to comfort and support us through it; we can be thankful that tough times aren't forever but God is.

Surely at some time you've said to someone, "Thanks, anyway." "Thanks, anyway" is usually said out of disappointment, as in "Well, it didn't work out but I know you tried, and I appreciate your effort – thanks anyway." But "Thanks, anyway" could also be a statement of our resolve to show appreciation and be thankful in every circumstance: recognizing God's constant generosity toward us, we resolve to express our thanks any way we can – wherever and whenever and with whomever, and with whatever we can. And giving thanks any way starts by training ourselves to recognize all in our lives we have to be grateful for. An Australian woman named Hailey Bartholomew did just that – training herself to be more grateful.

¹ <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-proper-perspective-on-thanksgiving-steve-malone-sermon-on-thanksgiving-40858.asp?Page=3>, accessed 11/18/2016

² <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-proper-perspective-on-thanksgiving-steve-malone-sermon-on-thanksgiving-40858.asp?Page=5>, accessed 11/18/2016

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Good News translation

In 2008... Hailey... found that she wasn't enjoying life. She described herself as feeling lost and stuck on a treadmill. It was almost inexplicable. She was married to a man she loved and had beautiful children who held her heart. So why was she feeling so down about her life? Hailey sought the counsel of a nun, who advised her to spend time each day reflecting on something for which she was grateful. Hailey began a project called "365grateful." Every day she took a photograph of something for which she was grateful.

It changed her life, for it allowed her to see things she had never noticed. Hailey had always thought of her husband as unromantic. One day she took a picture of him serving up dinner, the thing which she was grateful for that day. She noticed for the first time that the largest portion of pie was placed on her plate. She realized that the largest portion was always placed on her plate and that this was one small but profound way her husband showed his care for her. Hailey had found mothering a "boring job," but as she took photos of her children holding out their hands to her, playing and exploring, she discovered how much joy and wonder there was in her world. Through the art of gratitude Hailey found herself lifted out of her rut and celebrating life.⁴

So to wrap this up, recall the Old Testament verses we heard earlier from the book of Deuteronomy:

"When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God...."⁵

Moses was speaking to the Hebrew people escaping captivity in Egypt. They had left hardship, yes, but at least the hardship was familiar. Now they were heading toward what promised to be a better situation, and yet it was unfamiliar and would include challenges of its own. But those words to the Hebrew people also sound like they were written for Hailey or for you or me. As we walk through our lives we're urged to stop taking for granted all the things that we have going for us while we obsess on the few things that are causing us problems. Instead, we are to "Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances...." Not just at dinner this Thursday but in every moment let us give *thanks any way* we can.

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⁴ <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/thankfulness/>

⁵ Deuteronomy 8:12-14 Good News translation