

“Prayer: A Habit of Giving Thanks”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

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Two turkeys were talking one day in early November. I mean real turkeys, not people. Well, not exactly real, because they were talking. Anyway, Tony the Turkey yells, "Hey Tom, get outta sight! What are you thinking being out in the open like that? Don't you know it just turned November?" Tom struts: "Nothing to worry about this year!" Tony: "What are you talking about?" Tom replies: "Went to the store last weekend. You should've seen all the decorations! Started with five aisles of Halloween followed straight away by twelve rows of Christmas. No Thanksgiving at all! They completely bypassed Thanksgiving this year!"

We already hear Christmas carols at the coffee shops and the shopping malls. On Halloween day, there was a lot of fun decorating the house with Halloween stuff, but now we are ready to race to Christmas. There are many good reasons to celebrate what we can buy, consume and enjoy, but I wonder whether we are missing Thanksgiving in these days or not. Our society and our media pushes us to be good consumers, buying more goods in this holiday season, rather than pushing us to take a moment to acknowledge how much we are grateful for in our lives. It is also easy to miss Thanksgiving because of all the anxieties and concerns in our minds. This morning, I would like to continue to talk about our life attitude of giving thanks as a part of our prayer life.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our life is driven by something. Here, “drive” means, “to guide, to control or to direct.” For example, when you drive a car, you will guide and direct it following your desire. It can be your wish to reach a destination like going home or coming to church for worship. So, in our daily lives, we may be driven by something that guides our heart. Some people may be driven by a painful memory (being stuck in the past), by materialism (a desire for possessions) or other circumstances. How about your life? What is the driving force in your life?

The Christian life is oriented by faith (trusting God). Faith is a gift of the grace of God. It leads us to repent our sins and moves us forward to the future being holy in our daily lives. Our prayer life constantly reminds us that we are children of God. Prayer enables us to know more of God not by knowledge but through establishing a relationship like walking with, talking to, and listening to God. As St. Augustine (354-430) reminded us, “Prayer trains our love.” God

already knows our troubles, our difficulties and our broken hearts, but through prayer, we are known by God. The goal of prayer life is to be closer with God. We know that God will renew our souls as a response of our prayer. In today's reading, the Apostle Paul offers specific practices as an effective way to communicate with God. Those practices include regular rejoicing, constant prayer, persistent thanksgiving, an openness to the Spirit's voice through the prophets and the life of the community, and discernment about what is good.

When I was young, I couldn't understand Paul's advice. How can we keep rejoicing always, pray constantly and being thankful all the time and in any circumstances? I thought that it was not 'possible' to accomplish it. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to his congregation, a congregation under persecution of the Roman Emperor. Individually, and as a faith community, they were struggling in life. Even Paul had to face many difficult moments himself throughout threats on his life in jail during his ministry. What made him persistent? What made him renew his faith - not giving up but pushing forward?

He encourages us saying, "May the God of peace personally make you holy through and through, and may you be kept fully healthy in spirit and soul and body, blameless at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul reminds us: "I know that, Yes, you will suffer. Yes, you may continue to have questions, conflicts, and doubts in life. But God's will for you is to be made whole and holy, here and now, in this present world." The moments of suffering in the here and now are not the end result. Instead, we are called to practice rejoicing, praying, and listening for the Spirit who opens us to see and cooperate with God. We are made to be holy and to be a blessing in one another's lives. This is who God wants us to be.

Let's imagine it this way: Life can be compared to a journey on this earth. What if you could give your child three things only for their journey in life? What would you choose? Do you think it would be better to bless them with money, a status of honor or a brilliant intelligence to succeed in their business? I often think of my baby Jacob. He is going to turn to one year old next week. If I could ask God for any special blessing for him, I believe Paul's advice is what I would want to share with him: **"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live."** What if you are always down and blue, denying the need of God, but complaining all the time? This will make life a disaster and an unhappy journey even in your life here. We know that consumerism, materialism and social status will not bring us "happiness" and "contentment" in our hearts. Joy doesn't come from our possessions. A deep joy

and contentment comes from our heart and our attitudes. There is a saying, “Your attitude determines your altitude in life.”

I remember a man that I met at the hospital. He was 43 years old, a patient for a kidney transplant, but he had been undergoing dialysis for over 20 years since he couldn't get a kidney donor. He had been enduring dialysis three times a week for 4 hours on a regular basis for 20 years. He started getting ill when he was 23 years old, and he couldn't keep working because of his illness. It was very hard for him to survive and take care of himself for those long years. Nevertheless, there was a smile on his face, and he said he still thanked God for dialysis and life. Since I know that it was not easy for him to say thanks to God, I could see his deep faith in his sharing of his life story, for this man who had been enduring dialysis, 3 times a week, 4 hours over 20 years was not separated from the love of God. Can we imagine how he endured all that pain and hardship? The distress and persecution he suffered had not separated him from the love of God. So, it was so moving to me that he thanked God.

An old hymn, “In the Garden” reminds us what our Christian life is: God walks with me, talks with me and God tells me that I am his own.” Our prayer life will lead us to a life of gratitude and joy. Augustine warns us that when we do not pray “our hearts are trammelled in the direction of ungrateful possessiveness.” Our life journey may be a rehearsal before an encounter with God someday. When God asks you how your life journey was on this earth, what will your answer be? I hope that we will answer, “Thank you, God, I enjoyed life. I was glad that you were with me in prayer, and I thank you for the time to love and to be loved from loved ones. It was worth it!” As the Apostle Paul suggests to us, let's continue our faith practices until we will meet our God all together. In this season of thanksgiving, I pray that we can find many reasons why we are so blessed and thankful to God, not because of what we have but because of who we are and what God has given us in His love and grace.