

Give Thanks

The majority of the New Testament is written in the form of letters to specific churches and most of those letters were written by the Apostle Paul. And Paul's letters generally take a certain shape. Reverend Ian Simpkins humorously summed up Paul's general outline for his letters like this:

Grace to you.
I thank God for you.
Hold fast to the gospel.
For the love of everything holy, stop being stupid.
Timothy says hi.

Paul kind of reminds me of a parent talking to his adult children and it doesn't matter how old they are, they still need you to tell them what to do, right.

Any parents of adult children feel any sympathy for Paul?

I'm looking at you Ann Riley.

Anyone out there who has parents that still tell you what to do even though you've been adulting for a long time have sympathy for the recipients of Paul's letter?

So my Mom can definitely relate to what it must have felt like for Paul. For the last several weeks, I've been battling a cold and so I got this text from my mom.

Good morning.
How are the girls?
Your dad and I are about to go for a walk.
Is your cold any better? I'm sure you have sense enough to go to the doctor today.
Love you.

Now, in fairness to me, I had actually already been to the doctor and they told me I had a viral infection and they wouldn't give me an antibiotic. I had explained all this to my mom over and over again. Going back to the doctor would be a waste of time. But this text was Mom's way of saying, "Are you really that stupid. Get your butt to the doctor." So I did. And guess, what – Mom was right. I needed an antibiotic.

And while she never says this, my guess is my Mom must think all the time, "Your life would just be so much easier if you just did what I told you to do in the first place."

That's kind of the vibe Paul has going in his letters. Actually, a pretty interesting way to read Paul's letters is to imagine they are an email or a text from your parent telling you what you should have sense enough to be doing already. And Paul always ends his letters with just some

general instructions. So for example, the whole point of his letter was usually about one or two things, but at the end, he can't help himself but to give his laundry list of all the other things his readers should be doing. That's what our Scripture is today – Paul's final list of instructions.

He tells the Thessalonians to be nice to each other, to rejoice, to pray every day, to abstain from evil, and to give thanks in every circumstance. As it's the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I thought we could focus on Paul's instruction to give thanks in every circumstance.

And like it is with my mom, Paul's nagging of his readers is generally pretty good advice. In today's world, he even has science to back him up about why giving thanks is so important. According to the Mayo Clinic, the health benefits of gratitude are enormous. In an article from the Mayo Clinic's website, they write, "Studies have shown that feeling thankful can improve sleep, mood and immunity. Gratitude can decrease [depression](#), anxiety, difficulties with chronic pain and risk of disease." Then they go on to say, "If a pill that could do all this, everyone would be taking it."

Now, my guess is we all know how beneficial cultivating gratitude is, but that doesn't mean it's easy to live into. There are all sorts of things, not least of which are just the sheer challenges of life, that get in the way of living out of gratitude. And so let me pause for a minute and say what gratitude is not. Gratitude is not the same thing as looking on the bright side. It is not the same thing as pretending like the really crappy parts of our lives aren't that bad. And it's certainly not about feeling guilty because the places of pain feel so heavy. Gratitude is never meant to be a weapon and none of us have the right to tell somebody who is going through something that we're not that they should just be thankful for what they have. Part of the point of spiritual disciplines, including gratitude, is to not live out of guilt or out of shame. So please hear me when I say that gratitude is not about trying to force yourself to believe things are better than they actually are.

But the gift of gratitude, I think, is that it invites us to still be able to see the beauty and the goodness around us, even when life stinks. We can cry, we can rage, we can wish with everything in us that some aspect of our life, or some aspect of the world would be different, and still at the same time see and appreciate and be thankful for the goodness and the beauty that is part of our lives and part of the world too. But cultivating that kind of gratitude takes practice.

Again, science backs this claim up. The article from the Mayo clinic goes on to say, "Your brain is designed to problem-solve rather than appreciate. You often must override this design to reap the benefits of gratitude."

I mean think of it like this, if I wanted to run a marathon, I wouldn't just show up to the race without having trained. I would practice to get my body ready to run the race. The same is true with spiritual disciplines like cultivating gratitude. Living out of gratitude doesn't come naturally for most of us. We have to train for it.

Fortunately, we have a lot of wise sages, from many different fields, that can help us.

First, the Jesuit preacher and contemplative theologian Richard Rohr – who by the way writes a daily devotional that I highly recommend – calls us to see all of life and everything we have as a gift from God. Rohr hopes that if we see the good things in our life as a gift rather than as something we've earned or deserve, it helps us be thankful for who we are and for what we have. That's not to say, we haven't worked hard. It's not to say that there aren't things we have earned and things we certainly deserve, but if we focus on seeing life as a gift, it helps us be grateful for what our life is instead of resentful for what our life is not.

This is why, for example, it's a good practice to pray before meals because even though we all certainly worked to put food on the table, we also need to be reminded that food is also a gift from God. We need to be reminded to see everything as a gift.

Secondly, we can let go of trying to compare ourselves to others. It was Teddy Roosevelt who said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." I don't know about you, but when I compare myself to others, I almost always do so with those who have more – those who have more financial resources, those who are more successful, those who have it more together. And when I do that, my mind inevitably goes to, "Why can't I be like them? Why can't I have what they have?"

The last of the 10 Commandments is do not covet what your neighbor has. And it's easy to think of the commandments as these rigid rules but I actually think they're meant to be sort of a guide for having a fulfilling life and maintaining our connections with community. It's not that I shouldn't covet because God will be mad at me if I do. Rather, if I spend all my energy focusing on what someone else has that I don't, I'm not going to be very happy. A life of gratitude is one that focuses on being the best version of yourself, not on trying to be somebody else.

Finally, we have the power to train our brains to operate out of a place of gratitude. The Mayo Clinic tells us that behavior can change biology. By incorporating simple practices to cultivate gratitude in our daily lives, we can actually change our brain chemistry. They have an entire program called Discover Gratitude that is completely free. You can google it and sign up and they email you a 30 day journal. Every day participants are invited to be intentional about performing at least one act of kindness, practicing mindfulness, and journaling about whatever it is you are thankful for in that day. I've got a copy of their journal here on the altar table if you want to look at it after church. According to the Mayo Clinic, gratitude is one of the most healthiest practices any of us can have – right up there with regular exercise and eating good food, and, the even better news, is that we all have the power to do simple things that will help us cultivate more gratitude in our lives.

It turns out that 2000 years later, we see how right Paul was. Living out of gratitude and choosing to incorporate the practices that help us live out of gratitude is one of the healthiest and most faithful choices we can make. So maybe an invitation for all of us is to take a few minutes each day to simply give thanks...not just at Thanksgiving but all year. Amen.