

“Deliriously Happy”

Some of the basic lessons I learned while growing up have been the lessons that have served me best. One lesson that my parents and grandparents drilled into my head is “always say thank you” when someone gives you something. “Thank you” may be two small words, but they are two words that are important building blocks of human character. In fact, I believe that it is impossible to experience gratitude until you first express gratitude or appreciation.

I sense we live in a time when people feel overly deserving ... that whatever they have, they deserved ... that whatever rewards come to them, they are due to them ... that whatever gifts ... whatever advantages, they earned ... that they have a right to everything. Self-indulgence ... self-aggrandizement are both culprits to a less than appreciative people ... and in some ways we all guilty of that fact. Saying “thank you” --- that’s very important! And we need reminded of that fact as we insist that our own children say thank you ... because children learn by example.

The Bible highlights this fact particularly in stories like the ten lepers that Jesus healed and only one returned to say thank you. Nine out of the ten lepers that Jesus healed did not say thank you ... so it was clear to Jesus that they didn’t show thanks. They weren’t glad all over, and consequently, missed the point of their healing, as well as missed the opportunity to elevated their hope and joy.

During the Season of Thanksgiving, I like to turn to the Psalms and read the prayers of the psalmist, who often captures the spirit of faith in the light of gratitude. Psalm 126 is such a psalm. It was written during a time when the happiness, comfort, and security of Israel was imperiled (probably shortly after their return from exile in Babylon). These were very hard times for Israel, and so the psalmist, in spite of great lamenting, pleads that the people *remember* God’s mercies of old ... instructs the people to think back to a much happier time ... and to remember the power of God.

According to Psalm 126, apparently the psalmist’s pleading worked, because as the people remembered a time in their history when God’s mercy broke forth in an unparalleled manner ... it resulted in a mood of great celebration among the people. In verse 2 we read that “laughter” and “joy” dominated their lives at that memorable time, and the psalmist now prays that these same mercies, producing these same joys, may be released in the lives of the people. Those who have sown “in tears” will then “reap with shouts of joy,” and the character of the community of Israel and of the individuals, who are members of it, will be transformed.

Upon our reading of the whole Psalm 126, it is obvious that the psalmist was glad all over. He was thankful and said so. Out of the terribly hard times of the exile that he and others had been through, come now this shout of joy and thanksgiving: “Our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy ...” That is hardly a quiet “thank you.” It is, however, an example of what my parents and grandparents taught me ... that to experience gratitude, you need to express gratitude. The psalmist was deliriously happy and made no bones about it.

“Gratitude is the soul of religion.” God requires gratitude not for God’s sake and not because God likes applause. God requires gratitude for our own sake. Something happens to the person ... transforms / changes people when they learn *how* to be thankful. A thankful people are a growing, changing people ... a people who become more *soul-full* than they were before.

I believe one of the tasks of the Christian church is to teach ... motivate ... convert, if necessary ... people to be grateful. For far too many people today are without a sense of appreciation. And to be honest without a sense of gratitude no other sense makes sense. There is too much emphasis placed on fleeting admiration ... like the latest style ... the latest movie ... the best seller ... the latest Play Station. But how do you or I appreciate that which is enduring? One way is to provide children with an atmosphere of gratitude. Appreciation must begin at home. Unless appreciation is in your home ... unless the words “Thank you” are heard often and regularly from your lips, then the home will always be lacking. You can not teach children to be thankful, if you are unable to show it yourself!

I like very much the Season of Thanksgiving because I believe it is a time ... an opportunity for each of us to think back and remember ... to make the time in order to recall the events in your life that have brought you to this

point in time ... this moment of existence. Like the psalmist calling Israel to look back and to remember the good times along with the bad ... we, too, need to recall the times when we experienced God's presence in our life ... the times we prayed and our prayers were answered. Again, far too often, we become caught up in the "immediate" and think all of life is that way.

But we need to remember those experiences that pulled us back from the brink of our own emotional disaster ... those times when we thought all was lost, but somehow we pulled through. Faith is an ongoing source of energy that keeps life events in perspective and reminds us that certain events in our life are not the end of the world. No matter what happened yesterday, no matter what happens today ... life will go on ... with or without us! All our worries ... our fear are pretty much a waste of time and energy. It is better to spend our time trusting the faith that we have.

For example: Damaged and closed during the Civil War, William and Mary stayed closed for seven years following the conflict. However, every morning during those seven years, President Ewell rang the bell. There were no classes, no students, and no faculty. Rain poured in through the leaky roofs of the deserted buildings, but President Ewell still rang the bell. It was his way of saying that despite immediate disaster, the intellectual life will be back again and the empty halls will be filled again. President Ewell truly lived the wisdom of Psalm 126.

Friends, no matter the circumstance ... despite the situation ... laughter and joy are good for the soul. Remembering God's mercies ... recalling God's blessings ... are sources of strength to help us bear up under difficult times. Along with laughter is the necessity to sing ... to sing with enthusiasm ... remembering that "those who sing --- pray twice!" True thanksgiving does not depend upon material comfort and happiness. This is beautifully illustrated by the story behind the great hymn "Now Thank We All our God."

Martin Rinkart was the head pastor of the church in the city of Eilenberg during the Thirty Years War that ravaged Europe during the 17th Century. Because Eilenberg was a walled city, it often became extremely over-crowded when one of the enemy armies rampaged through the area. Many citizens became ill and died, either from disease or malnutrition. Because the other officials and pastors died or ran away, Pastor Rinkart during the terrible pestilence of 1637 was the sole pastor of the city. He presided over several hundred funerals that year and throughout the terrible years of war, close to five thousand --- one of them his own wife. Yet, he continued to preach hope and minister to the needs of others. He was a musician as well as a pastor, and it might have been this that kept his faith strong.

Amidst all this suffering he wrote the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God" ... a hymn that is so majestic and full of thankful hope. Originally entitled "A Short Grace before Meals," this hymn soon was applied more widely than just mealtimes. The first stanza enjoins us to thank God for all the "wondrous things" God has done throughout our lives. Only in the middle stanza is there any hint of the horrors that the author had witnessed: "And guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills, in this world and the next." The last stanza is the poet's reworking of "The Gloria Patria." This hymn, when you set it in it's originally context is absolutely amazing ... it is so full of the joy of the presence of and thanksgiving for God amid the ravages of war and diease. Over history it was sung on numerous other occasions when worshipers emerge from a trying time into one of peace and rest at last.

This coming Thursday, let us join with the psalmist and say: *Our mouths were full of laughter and our tongues sang aloud for joy; then word went round among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' Great things indeed the Lord then did for us, and we rejoiced.* Like Israel-of-old, we need to keep all of our life in memory ... memories vested in Jesus of Nazareth --- in his birth, in his life, in his redemptive death and his resurrection. If we can remember what God has done, we will have certain hope and expectations concerning what God can and will do now and in the future ... that He who came once will come again, and that the interim is a time in which the church actualizes the living Christ to the world by means of its witness and by its works of service

Particularly, we need to keep the life ... the 140 years of history of this church in memory. Not too long ago we were a mission church receiving funds from the Presbyterian Church (USA) ... there were time when the doors of this church were threatened to be closed ... the buildings in disrepair. However, today ... today we remember that the Lord has indeed done great things for us ... and we must be thankful ... we must rejoice! We can do no less but be a thankful people. Amen