

Thanks (2nd in Series on Anne Lamott's *Help, Thanks, Wow*)
September 17, 2017
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Today we are continuing our series, "Help, Thanks, Wow," which is loosely based on a book with the same title by Anne Lamott. She calls these the three essential prayers. Today we are talking about thanks and so I want to begin by offering thanks.

Thank you to Pastor Michelle, Dean Shepherd, and Lindsey Jacobs for going above and beyond to cover for my unexpected absence last Sunday. I tried to record a sermon and upload it but the internet was so slow I couldn't do it. They came up with Plan B.

I also want to thank all of you who worked hard to make Sandy Hansen's memorial so special. I tried to anticipate and prepare for as much as I could before I left on vacation but it was all of you that executed it and extended radical hospitality to Sandy's family and friends. So, thank you! I was never concerned about things working out but I was sad to not be able to participate in honoring the life of our dear friend.

Most of you know that last Sunday I was enjoying an extended cruise somewhere south and west of Cuba. The six-day cruise we hoped would return us to Miami on Saturday did not return until Tuesday night and we did not get off the ship until Wednesday. Thank you for your concern and prayers. We were never in danger. In fact, we felt guilty for our comfort while so many were confronting the devastating effects of Hurricane Irma.

The bus driver that took us to the airport talked about Irma being worse than Andrew. He lost part of his roof but was grateful. The TSA agent that checked us in came in to work two hours early because he did not have power or water at home. With 70% humidity the heat was oppressive. It was humbling to be served by people who returned to work rather than piecing together their own lives.

Someone asked me if it felt like the end of the world while we were out at sea. As Irma stormed toward land, Mexico was shaken by an 8.0 earthquake, Muslims began fleeing for their lives in Myanmar, and North Korea continued its deadly dalliance with nuclear weapons. The truth is, it is amazing how oblivious one can be on a cruise ship as life rages on. But it doesn't take long to be smacked back into reality. It also doesn't take long to feel what I can only describe as looming darkness, or gloom and doom. Sadly, the world's woes were not resolved while I was out at sea.

Some of you, perhaps many of you, feel the world's brokenness deeply. Things we previously took for granted are changing, like the notion that our children will have it better than our generation. There are even real threats to human existence. I completely understand if you feel a sense of sadness, maybe even despair, over our human condition. The even stranger thing is that we are expected to keep working, keep going to school, keep planning, keep dreaming, because giving up is not an option.

In addition to global gloom and doom, many are experiencing more personal struggles. Some are struggling with chronic and debilitating illness. Some are struggling with financial concerns. Some are struggling with family relationships. Some are struggling to find meaningful and life-sustaining employment. Some are tired. Some are depressed. Some wonder where God has gone for vacation and if/and when God will show up.

If you wanted, you could feast on bad news and enjoy a perpetual belly ache. If you wanted, you could complain and gripe and live on the defensive, receiving any imposition as a personal attack. If you wanted, you could go to a very dark place and just say, “What’s the use?” Even if you didn’t want to do any of these things you have to work hard to keep your brain from going there. According to research, our brains have a negativity bias and are wired with a greater sensitivity toward bad news.¹ The assumption is that this bias was necessary for dodging danger. What it means today is that our brains soak up bad news. One article suggested it takes five times as much positive influence to rival the negative.

So, what is the antidote? Gratitude. Thanks.

Long before science proved its benefits, the great religious traditions encouraged the practice of gratitude. In our own tradition, we have the Psalms declaring thanks. Psalm 136 begins, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever...” The point is not to wait until you feel blessed or something good happens to say thanks – the point is to give thanks no matter what. It is not only good for maintaining a spiritual connection with God – it is good, in fact, necessary, for mental health. By expressing thanks, we become thankful. AND – expressing thanks has no negative side effects. There is no downside.

The Apostle Paul even has the audacity to tell people who are struggling to, “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances.” He has the audacity to say this, not because he is twisted but because he loves them. In giving thanks, we shift our perspective. In giving thanks, we embrace reality and open ourselves to new insight and new opportunity. In giving thanks, we lift up our chins, look around, and start paying attention. And if we are paying attention, we can ask questions that lead us to respond rather than react. We can ask, “What is going on here?” instead of reacting impulsively. We can get curious, rather than judgmental. Giving thanks can infuse our brain with positivity and actually rewire our brain’s negative patterns when practiced in a disciplined fashion.

A well-known study on gratitude found that people who focus on gratitude, by keeping a list of what there were grateful for, exercised more often, had fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives, and were more positive about the week ahead compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events. Grateful people report more positive emotions, more vitality and optimism, and greater life satisfaction as well as lower levels of stress and depression.²

Giving thanks, in all circumstances, awakens us to God’s presence, startles us with beauty, and surprises us with joy. And it is good for you.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200306/our-brains-negative-bias>

² *The Book of Joy*, p. 248 (study by Emmons and McCullough)

Anne Lamott says it keeps us from being jerks. She writes, “You are always welcome to file a brief with the Complaints Department, but if you’ve been around for a while you know that, much of the time, if you are patient and paying attention, you will see that God will restore what the locusts have taken away.”³ She also says, “If you gently help yourself back into the present moment you see how life keeps stumbling along and how you may actually find your way through another ordinary or impossible day.”⁴ For her, stopping to say thanks, even in the midst of some kind of funk, takes you out of yourself and opens us up to God, to light, to each other.

So, when it feels like the end of the world – or just the end of your rope you can do something besides eating chips and binge-watching Hallmark Channel Movies. You can give thanks – whether you feel like it or not – you can give thanks. There is always something for which to give thanks – even if you can’t figure out what it is. Well known teacher and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “I am willing to thank God for my life even before I know how it turns out.”

So, if you want to feel better, act better, and better equipped to make the world better...start with a few words of thanks. Anne Lamott is so right, however you say it, it is essential.

³ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, p. 50.

⁴ *Help, Thanks, Wow*, p. 52.