

Thanksgiving Message November 25, 2009
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller
Matthew 6:25-33
Thankfulness

I have seven stories to share with you this evening...

Story #1... is a funny story. Two men were walking through a field one day when suddenly they saw an enraged bull running right at them from across the field. They started running as fast as they could towards the nearest fence. The bull was in hot pursuit, and it was obvious the men were not going to make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Pray, Stanley, pray! We're in for it!"

Stanley answered, "I can't. I've never prayed in public before in my life."

"But your dad was a pastor, surely he taught you some sort of prayer! So pray Stanley, pray! The bull is catching-up to us."

"All right! All right," Stanley said. "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to say at the dinner table, 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'"

We gather tonight to give thanks; not only to give thanks, but to be thankful too. Some of us may not feel so thankful this year. Instead, we perhaps feel worried, like the bull is catching-up to us. We perhaps feel anxious, concerned, lonely, distressed, or just plain bored.

Story #2... This past week I found myself thinking about our world right now. And it dawned on me that we live in a cruel world. Things happen to us beyond our control. And sometimes it's hard to be thankful in certain circumstances.

I thought about the two women who were killed in the head-on collision on 422 last Thursday evening here in Myerstown. I wondered what their families are going through this week without their loved ones. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

I thought about the family I know whose loved one has a drug problem and will be spending the holiday season in a rehab center this year. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

I thought about a friend of mine who was diagnosed with bone cancer this past week. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

I thought about the economy. We're told it's getting better, but I know people who will be loosing their job next week. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

I thought about the men and women fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and the miles between them and their loved ones back home. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

You have your own stories or know of stories of how cruel this world can be. Sometimes it's hard to be thankful.

Story #3... In our reading from Matthew Jesus says, "Don't worry about your life... God will provide." Question: what is your thanksgiving like this year? Is it joy and gratitude, or anxiety and worry? I don't know about you but sometimes I find it hard to do what Jesus says and not worry about life.

St. Paul said something similar in his letter to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Paul was always giving thanks to God. In his letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

In our reading from Timothy this evening, Paul urges us to constantly lift up all sorts of prayers, especially prayers of thanksgiving for everyone (1 Tim 2:1). Of course, it's easy for us to say that it was easy for Jesus and Paul to give thanks because they were spiritual giants. But consider this, St. Paul talked about how difficult his life was in his letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). It wasn't easy...

Paul said, "I have worked hard. I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."

And this is the guy who said, "Give thanks always!" Paul says, be thankful when things are going great, and be thankful when things are not going our way.

It's hard to be thankful when someone close to us dies, or when our health is threatened, or when we lose our job, or when we go through a divorce, or when we face a failure in life. It's hard to be thankful when it seems life is at its cruelest.

And yet, Paul wrote "give thanks in all circumstances." I believe he wrote this not to down play the hard times we face but to realize that God provides in all circumstances. God provides in good times and in bad.

Story #4... A Scottish minister named Alexander Whyte, was known for his uplifting prayers in worship. He always found something to be thankful for. One Sunday

morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought, “Certainly the pastor won’t think of anything to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this.” Much to the man’s surprise, Whyte began worship by praying, “We thank you, O God, that every day is not always like this.” (Daily Bread, August 26, 1989)

Story #5... There is a story from Budapest, about a man who goes to the rabbi and complains, “Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?” The rabbi answers, “Take your goat into the room with you.” The man is furious, but the rabbi insists. “Do as I say. And come back in a week.”

A week later the man comes back to the rabbi looking more distraught than ever before. “We cannot stand it,” he tells the rabbi. “The goat is filthy.” So the rabbi tells him, “Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week.”

The man returned a week later radiant and exclaims, “Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there’s no goat in our room. It is so much better with just the nine of us.” (George Mikes, How to be Decadent, Andre’ Deutsch, London)

Being thankful in all situations is sometimes simply a matter of having the right attitude. It’s more than simply looking on the bright side. It’s a state of mind. We don’t have to look very far to find someone who is going through a tougher time than we are.

Story #6... Our closing hymn tonight is titled, “Now Thank We All Our God.” It was written by a German Pastor, Martin Rinkhart. He wrote this hymn in the 1600’s during the darkness of the Thirty Years’ War while hundreds of people were dying. Pastor Martin Rinkhart, is said to have buried five thousand of his parishioners in one year, an average of fifteen a day. His congregation was ravaged by war, and death, and economic disaster.

In the middle of all that darkness, with the cries of fear right outside his door, he sat down and wrote this table grace for his children:

*Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things had done,
In whom His world rejoices.
Who, from our mother’s arms,
Hath led us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.*

Story #7... Is your story yet to be written this year. Thankfulness isn’t just an appreciation for the things that God does for us or for the things that God gives to us. Thankfulness is an appreciation for the faithfulness of God in our lives. We worship a faithful God. Now that’s something to be thankful for. Amen.