

“The Four Things That Matter Most: Thank You”
1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Today we continue the sermon series of “The Four Things That Matter Most” with a focus on the power of verbalizing gratitude. In his book *The Four Things That Matter Most*, Dr. Ira Byock emphasizes the importance of saying these words to our loved ones, especially at the time of death. People often assume that their loved ones know how much they appreciate them without seeing the need to say the words out loud. This unfortunately misses the point of why we need to say thank you. Since our words matter and since words create worlds, saying that we are thankful has the power to deepen our relationships and our sense of life. Dr. Byock says that, “In the act of saying thank you we expand ourselves.” Our inner capacity for love expands when we are grateful and when we take the time to express that gratitude. Yet, there are many obstacles to taking the time to say thank you. We are often too busy, too focused on the pressing matters of life, or preoccupied by the negative parts of life. One of the biggest challenges for this practice of gratitude is our expectations. We take things for granted. We also expect things to go a certain way and when they don’t, we feel let down. In a 2015 New York Times article about thanksgiving called “The Structure of Gratitude,” David Brooks wrote (screen), “I’m sometimes grumpier when I stay at a nice hotel. I have certain expectations about the service that’s going to be provided. I get impatient if I have to crawl around looking for a power outlet... if the place considers itself too fancy to put a coffee machine in each room. I’m sometimes happier at a budget motel, where my expectations are lower, and where a functioning iron is a bonus and the waffle maker in the breakfast area is a treat. This little phenomenon shows how powerfully expectations structure our moods and emotions, none more so than the beautiful emotion of gratitude.”

This was exactly the answer which the Apostle Paul gave to the church in Thessalonica. Their expectations about the second coming of Christ got in the way of their ability to appreciate and enjoy what was right in front of them: his presence in their hearts. Paul had a good relationship with that church. There were some issues, but overall, he thought they were on the right track. This was the capital city in Macedonia, a bustling seaport, with a new church largely gentile in membership.

He wrote to give the new converts both instruction and encouragement in their trials. There was a lot of pressure in that city on the church to conform to the norms of their society. This was a city that had a very dominant Imperial Cult where the worship and adoration of the emperor was very important. The followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were trying to be faithful and one of the things that gave them great hope is the belief that the return of Jesus was imminent. They just needed to hold on a little longer and things as they knew them would end. The way they understood the teachings of Paul was that Jesus was coming back literally before any of them would die. But several of them had died and it seemed that the delay in the physical return of Jesus was making them fearful. What if they got it all wrong? What if this second coming was not going to happen in their lifetime? These must have been tough questions for Paul to answer because the expectations of the people were getting in the way of their ability to

appreciate their lives and the presence of Christ in them in the present moment. Paul brilliantly responds in a very caring way. He reminds them of the basics of following the way of Jesus and that doing those things is the only way to live with hope in times of uncertainty. One of the things he prescribes to them is to give thanks in all circumstances. Even though their expectations about the timeline of the return of Jesus were bringing them down, they needed to be reminded that the only proper response is to keep the faith, pray, fulfill their mission, and to give thanks.

What does that mean for us today as we look at the practice of saying thank you each day? I don't believe that it means that we are not aware of the challenges we face each day or the pain that life inflicts upon us. Instead, I believe that it means that we stop taking life for granted. I think that it means that we stop the frenzy of pursuing more because we feel that we don't have enough or that we are not enough. It means that we stop to enjoy the ordinary and to see the sacred in the mundane. It means taking the time to pray each day giving thanks for the gifts of life. It means saying to those around you "thank you" as much as you can when you pay attention each day to how others bless your life and how your life would be without them.

We are going to take a few moments to imagine our community and our lives without all the people that make it possible and whom we take for granted: Imagine in your mind's eye all the activities of your week. Take a bird's-eye view of the whole week. Now imagine your week without the people that pick up the garbage in your neighborhood; without the people who deliver food to the store where you shop or the restaurant where you eat; without the people who deliver medicine to your local pharmacy; without the people who respond to emergency calls; and without the people who maintain the electric power grid. Take a look at your week now and see if it is possible. Now take a moment to give thanks for all who make your life possible each day. Pray that you will always be mindful of the gifts that you receive each day. Give thanks to God for your part in helping others.

Mr. Fred Rogers talked about every person being special in the way they are created in the world. One time at a graduation, he defined what it means for us to be loved just as we are (section 14:51 to 16:12):

<https://youtu.be/907yEkALaAY>

(second service) "And what that ultimately means, of course, is that you don't ever have to do anything sensational for people to love you. When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see, or hear, or touch. That deep part of you, that allows you to stand for those things, without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate. Peace that rises triumphant over war. And justice that proves more powerful than greed. So, in all that you do in all of your life, I wish you the strength and the grace to make those choices which will allow you and your neighbor to become the best of whoever you are."

So the invitation is to let go of our expectations about the sensational and the marvelous in order to truly appreciate what we already have. Don't wait for God to give you a big sign in the sky or don't waste your energy trying to figure when the end of the world will come, or the second coming will happen. Instead, focus your energy on God's presence that is already within and around you. Don't wait until someone does something fantastic before you say "Thank You." Take the time to thank the people around for showing up, for taking the time to be with you, for doing something small but important for your well-being, and especially for being part of your journey. Pay attention to all the things that are going well in our world and in our country. Give thanks for the people who are doing their jobs faithfully and without much fanfare. And remember these words from Lynne Twist: "We're not grateful because we are happy, we're happy because we are grateful." Amen.