

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church**  
**Sunday, February 4, 2024**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Theme: People of the Light: Three Keys to a Meaningful Life

[prayer]

Each of us has a definition of what makes a life good. We may not be able to fully articulate it, but we know it when we see it and our hearts long after it. In college I started keeping a notebook with quotes and poems from all kinds of writers and thinkers. This was my attempt to define for myself the “good life” – how to be successful at this thing called being human. I looked back through that notebook recently and came across something Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. He said,

*“To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better...to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”*

This is Emerson’s definition of a good life. At the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul does much the same as Emerson: He defines what will make a good life for these brand-new Christians who are striving to follow Jesus in the face of opposition. Each sentence is a little jolt of encouragement, galvanizing them to “press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14 NRSVUE). While the Thessalonians watch and pray for the Parousia, Paul exhorts them to make the most of the lives that God has redeemed for them. For these final sixteen verses he outlines the kinds of behaviors and spiritual postures that will bring meaning to their lives whatever circumstances they face.

At the center of this list of exhortations stands three simple but powerful verses: “Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18 CEB). These are Paul’s three keys to living a meaningful life.

I admit that my gut reaction when I hear or read these verses is discouragement. Rejoice *always*? Pray *constantly*? Give thanks *no matter what*? These commands feel superhuman. I easily fail at them on my best days, let alone my worst days. Surely God will be content if I just *try* to do these things? But Paul does not qualify his statement; his words are not aspirational. He does not tell us to *try* to rejoice always, *try* to pray constantly, or *try* to give thanks in every situation. The Greek is in the imperative mood. Paul commands us to do these things and do them completely.

Is this an unrealistic expectation? Yes...but only if you misunderstand what Paul is telling us to rejoice over, pray about, and give thanks for. Paul is not commanding us to rejoice and give thanks *for* difficult and painful circumstances. Paul is commanding us to rejoice and give thanks *despite* our difficult and painful circumstances. And what we rejoice and give thanks for is that those circumstances are temporary. They are manifestations of our present age. And followers of Jesus do not put their hope in this present age. Instead, we put our hope in the future reign of Christ when we have been promised that the former things will pass away, and God will make all things new (Rev 21:3-5).

These verses are a good example of what happens when biblical commands are removed from their surrounding context. We paint these words on coffee mugs, print them on t-shirts, and turn them into wall art – and in the process we trivialize them. They become an inspirational Christian saying rather than a disciplined way of living. But these words weren’t simply tokens of inspiration for the Thessalonian Christians. They were life-preservers – spiritual practices to cling to when the waves of hostility, suffering, and death threatened to drown them.

Joy, prayer, and gratitude are spiritual practices, spiritual resources, that will help us face our own moments of hostility, suffering, and death. The good life is not found in our circumstances, but in our spiritual posture toward those circumstances. And a Christian’s spirit is always leaning into the beautiful vision of God’s kingdom. While we grapple with the difficulties of the here and now, our

hope is fixed on that vision. We rejoice in the future kingdom. We pray for that future kingdom. We give thanks for the promise of that kingdom and the knowledge that God keeps His promises.

These three spiritual disciplines – joy, prayer, and gratitude – are strength exercises that build the muscle of our faith. They train our spiritual vision to see our present circumstances through the lens of God’s kingdom come. As our faith grows stronger, we can see manifestations of God’s future kingdom in our present reality. We can see moments in the present age where God is *already* making things new – redeeming and restoring and remaking the world into the New Creation that has been promised. And when we see these glimpses of that coming age, Paul commands us to rejoice and give thanks to God. These glimpses are assurances from the Holy Spirit that heaven is coming to earth. The more we catch these glimpses, the more our faith is strengthened and affirmed. And so, we pray to God for a deeper awareness of all the ways that God is already making things new. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...on earth as it is in heaven.”

Paul points to the community of believers as one such manifestation of this new age breaking through into the present. He reminds the Thessalonians that their commitment to each other is a powerful witness to the kingdom of God. Paul calls the believers in Thessalonica to nurture certain behaviors that will build up the body of Christ. *Respect and support your church leaders. Live peacefully with one another. Take care of those among you who are struggling. Be patient with one another. If someone hurts you, do not retaliate. Instead, do good to them. Also do good to those outside the church* (vv. 12-15).

This is the shape of life in Christian community. Paul is calling the church in Thessalonica to live this distinctive life – to be a sign of heaven on earth. The witness of the church should look different than the witness of the world. We are called to live this way as a sign of God’s kingdom come. This distinctive witness is a vehicle for sharing the good news of Jesus with our neighbors.

Unfortunately, we know this distinctive witness isn’t always the norm. We all have experienced, on one occasion or another, mistreatment by a fellow believer. There is no hurt quite like church hurt, precisely because this kind of hurt is a failure of the kingdom behavior that we are accountable to. Our witness as followers of Jesus Christ must begin with the way that we treat one another in the church. If

we cannot love each other well, how can we expect to love those beyond the church well? Our witness as people of the light starts here in our church home with our church family. This is where we get to practice and grow our skills as followers of Jesus, skills that will benefit us beyond the church doors as we carry the love of God into our neighborhoods and workplaces and wider community.

[pause]

The centerpiece of Paul's final exhortations to the Thessalonians is this one short clause: "This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (v. 18). In Judaism, the will of God usually refers to a set of behaviors and practices, not the things that happen or do not happen to us. God's will is practical, focused on growing us in the image of His son. Paul commands us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks *because* God desires these spiritual attitudes in us. And what these spiritual attitudes develop in us is a sense of purpose and meaning regardless of our circumstances. A life is meaningful when it finds its *telos* – its purpose for being. The *telos* of a Christian is to devote ourselves unreservedly to the God who has secured eternity for us, the God who is working "for the good of those who love him, according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28 NIV).

God asks us to fix our hearts on Him. If we are keeping God at the center of our lives, then joy, prayer, and gratitude will come naturally. It is when other things supplant God's rightful place in our lives that joy, prayer, and gratitude become governed by our circumstances. Unceasing joy, prayer, and gratitude are not hyperbole or an impossibility, but instead a call to unrestrained worship. They are our most faithful response to the message of the Gospel. When we gather at this communion table, as we will shortly, we proclaim that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. This is more than a statement of faith. It is the basis for our joy, the focus of our prayers, and the object of all our thanksgiving.

Still, friends, if your spirit today is weak and discouraged, and the call to unceasing joy, prayer, and gratitude feels too heavy, Paul sees you and offers you these words: "The One who calls is faithful" (v. 24). Which is to say, God does not ask you to do these things on your own. Keep God at the center of your life and what you lack He will be faithful to provide. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9 NRSVUE).

As we conclude Paul's letter and begin to journey into the shadows of Lent, we hold tight to our calling as People of the Light. The shadows in life may grow long, but the light of God always overcomes. And so, in the words of Paul,

“May the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming.” (v. 23).

Amen.