

Opening Story –

When I was a young boy I loved playing outside, getting dirty, collecting things to put in my pockets. It seemed I had so much room to put stuff. One pocket would have my yo-yo, another my homemade sailboat (not much more than an old twig) which I would put in a creek bed, or even inside the curb during a rainstorm. I'm sure I put frogs in my pockets, maybe a lizard or two. If I had a few pennies or a nickel I felt pretty rich and walked around with those loose coins in my pocket.

When I got home my mother would demand I take off my dirty jeans right next to the washing machine. Then I would watch her go through each pocket, turning it inside-out, to see if I had left anything in them. It seems to me I always had dirt in my pockets as well as my precious things. We might look at today, as a day where we turn our pockets inside-out. We turn our pocket-books inside-out. We pledge our financial resources; our precious gifts; we pledge ourselves to God's service. We give to God those things we no longer need and we give to God what God needs.

And on behalf of Pastors Larry and Diane and me, we say thank you in the biggest way we can. On behalf of all your staff here at VPC, we say thank you for your gifts! Thank you for your caring attitudes. Thank you for your loving hearts. Thank you, thank you, and thank you!

On behalf of the service you provide throughout the year, through your volunteer hours, your stewardship of Deacons and Elders, for leading worship services – we say thank you!

For providing pastoral care through NOC, making mission quilts, pillow cases, and prayer shawls, Prayer Ministry, Faith and Health, Stephen Ministry -- we say thank you!

For learning God's word in Bible Study classes, working through sorrows in Grief Recovery Class, serving at Coffee Fellowship, extending hospitality through meeting and greeting our newest visitors, through visiting the homebound, the sick and those in nursing homes, we say thank you.

For your work in Women's Ministry, and in Men's Bible Studies, for your care of the many mission projects here at VPC, for becoming new members – we say thank you!

Obviously, I could go on and on because of the wonderful ways you serve God through your actions within our church.

It feels good to say Thank you! We can all do that.

1 Thessalonians is full of exhortations. Our passage actually has eight of them in the first seven verses. An exhortation is encouragement – stand

strong – hang-in-there. John Calvin says that the proper translation from the Greek is “comfort yourself.” These commands are to be of comfort.

But these first three commands from today’s scripture are seemingly impossible. We’re called to ‘rejoice always.’ Anywhere, everywhere, at all times, find joy...? Remember mother saying, “Well, you’re just going to have make your own fun.” Make your joy! Put frogs and lizards in your pockets.

I know this seems like an impossible request from the Apostle. But, we rejoice today because of your pledges, your gifts, not knowing where they might lead us. In the church there is always hope in Christ and so, no matter how our raindrops of giving collect into pools of resources at the church, we find joy in your giving. We rejoice because of what God can do with the raindrops we give.

Our scripture also asks us to pray continually; without ceasing. Impossible! Yes? We cannot spend all our time on our knees, but it is possible to have a prayerful attitude at all times. This attitude is built upon acknowledging our dependence on God, realizing his presence within us, and determining to obey him fully. A prayerful attitude is not a substitute for regular times of prayer but should be a daily vigilance on our part to seek God at all times.

The Apostle in today's scripture commands us to give thanks in all circumstances. All circumstances... And he means all. We sigh... How do we do that when some of our circumstances are not what we had planned or intended or wanted and yet, we are encouraged to give thanks anyway. Sure seems like another impossible command.

The Apostle is teaching that we should thank God *in* everything, not *for* everything that happens to us. Evil does not come from God, so we should not thank him for that. But when evil strikes, we can still be thankful for God's presence and for the good that God will accomplish through the distress we go through.

Calvin connects these first three exhortations. They belong together – Can we do one without doing the other two?

In our worship of God we find the context for all of life, not just the part we devote to God during our time in a sanctuary. If we can find it in our hearts to worship God, wherever we are in life, then giving thanks in all circumstances becomes a product of that worship. Karl Rahner, a great theologian, said "Everyday life must become itself our prayer." All that you and I do throughout our day becomes a prayer to God. If we think like that and act like that then we truly have a prayerful attitude, in all circumstances.

So, be joyful, knowing that even during times of turmoil, God is in control. We can remain calm and tranquil enfolded in a quiet spirit because God is with us.

So, pray continually; unceasing prayer is what leads us to joy and away from our afflictions. Every day, all the time, you and I have the option to unload our burdens onto the awesome presence of God in our life.

And so give thanks; have you ever made a list of all the gifts God has given you, giving thanks to God for each one? One gift after another bestowed upon our life; gifts multiplying as we live. Our level of gratefulness is the sum of our time, talent and monies we in turn give back to God – all the many raindrops collected, blessed, multiplied and used to bring God's people together; to share God's love and mercy; to know salvation.

I don't feel rich by the money I have. For me, my wealth lies in the many ways God has touched me and my life; through relationships, through my faith journey, through the way God has showed me forgiveness, and his unlimited love and grace. That's when I know I'm wealthy!

Over sixty years ago there was a children's study done. The study was conducted to see how children behaved with discipline, with boundaries and also without boundaries. They observed the children carefully as they played on the playground and in the field.

They played in every corner of the school yard.

The researchers took notice of how they ran the edges of their boundaries, the fence protecting them within the playground.

They touched the fence and then ran back to some other part of the playground.

Then they took down the fences, removed the protective barriers/boundary from the playground. And the children's behavior changed! They didn't utilize the whole playground. Instead, they congregated in the middle of the playground. They didn't run to the edge of the playground at all. They didn't test their limits of physical space because they didn't know what their boundaries were.

The apostle Paul tells us to test everything. Get to know the truth. Stretch your boundaries to fully know God's love for you. We do in fact test God throughout our lives. We doubt, we question, we ask why over and over again. And we don't always get an answer, but its okay to question, doubt and probe and seek God. Sometimes, God's presence in our lives is so obvious and sometimes we search and search for anything that might confirm for us that God is with us.

Our Scripture helps us to test the Spirit around us, teaching us to "hold fast to what is good" and "abstain from every form of evil." It's not

impossible, even though it seems so. God also wants us to have the good life. “The good things in life, for you and me, are God’s will too.” That’s his will for us in Christ Jesus.

The good life – what we have all aspired to, striven for, worked hard to achieve.

For the Apostle’s friends in Thessalonica, **the good life is their salvation.** The good life is lived in a way that brings God the glory. The good life is lived in community with others who are not forgotten or rejected. It’s a way of being complete Christians challenging us to give in all circumstances. That’s the hope of the Apostle for us too. Unreserved, all-consuming self-giving! It is an emptying of our pockets, an emptying of our treasures we’ve stored up here on earth.

The good life is a wholeness of well-being; a life that rejoices at all times, prays without ceasing and gives thanks in all circumstances. May our raindrops of giving today bless us, this church and our Creator. Each of our gifts given to God with gratefulness adds colors to this world around us. Let’s make a rainbow of giving here at VPC. Amen.

Invite Katie Sayre up...