

While there is a lot about Jesus’s life that we know – based on the accounts of the four gospels, as well as this historical record about ancient Palestine during the Jesus’s time – there is also a lot we do not know. We don’t know much about what growing up was like for Jesus. We don’t know much about his family – his siblings. We don’t know much about what led Jesus to recognize his special calling as the Messiah – and why he chose to begin his ministry of miracles and teaching about the coming Kingdom of God.

But there is one thing that we absolutely, positively, without-a-shadow-of-a-doubt do know: And that is that Jesus never sat down to the kind of meal that awaits most of us this coming Thursday. We know that Jesus never tasted Stouffer’s stuffing. Or that gelatinous, inside-of-a-can-shaped cranberry sauce. Jesus wouldn’t have had an opinion on what is the best topping for sweet potato casserole (though the choice of brown sugar and pecans is obvious). Jesus never had a slice of pumpkin pie.

Thanksgiving (capital T), of course, is an American invention. The fourth Thursday of November and food and football are traditions of our own making as a nation – and not a church or liturgical event.

But...the Bible does actually have a lot to say about being grateful. So today – ahead of the day our Congress has set aside for a national holiday, we thought it might be good to consider how our faith informs thanksgiving.

Our Scripture is from the New Testament – a portion of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Before I read it, please join me in prayer. Let us pray...

Holy God – by your Spirit, may the words we read in this ancient text bring us wisdom for the living of these days. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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At the very beginning of this sermon, let me admit something to you.

Every time I decide to preach from one of Paul’s letters, I get about mid-way through my process of studying and thinking and reading, and I come to the same conclusion: I don’t like preaching from Paul’s letters.

You would think I’d remember that and just not do it...but the fact is, Paul’s letters make up a pretty good portion of the New Testament, and *they’re important*, so I do it anyway.

You know what one of my biggest beefs is with Paul?
He just sounds bossy. Preachy (isn’t that ironic, coming from me?)

Paul is always talking about what **not** to do. And what **to** do.
He loves making lists: of things that are bad...and of things that you should do more of.

And they’re not small things. Take today’s passage:

“Clothe yourselves with...compassion, and kindness, and humility, and meekness, and patience.”

“Bear with one another...and, if anyone has a complaint, or wrongs you, or treats you unfairly...forgive them”

Got it.

And then, this is my favorite...a little while later in the passage: And be thankful.

Be thankful.
That’s super helpful Paul.

Have you ever had one of those days...when life was going a million miles an hour and all the things that could go wrong did go wrong and you could feel your blood pressure rising...and, then, some extraordinarily constructive person in your life looked at you and said... “aww....don’t be stressed.”

I think that’s kind of like saying “Be thankful.”

What if I don’t want to be thankful.
What if too many things have happened in my life for me to be thankful?
What if I’m too worried about the world, or our country, or my family to have the energy to be thankful?

When I first read this passage this week with an eye for how to preach it, I got to “be thankful” and I literally threw my hands up. I had done it again. Picked good old Bossy Paul to admonish us with a list of things we should do...being thankful one of them.

But then, near the end of the passage, Paul says something that is *actually* helpful. Instead of just giving us a list of things to do, he offers a strategy – or a methodology – for how to do them.

Paul tells us to sing. He suggests that the way to express thanksgiving...the way to embody gratitude...isn't just to decide to have it...but that the way to express thanksgiving is to sing it.

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One of the perks about working for a church is that during the week you get to hear the organists practicing for upcoming services. I've got to say, it's pretty nice – coming in on a Tuesday morning after fighting traffic on Randolph Road for 20 or 30 or 40 minutes to make the walk to your office accompanied by the somber and soulful chorus of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Or to step out of a committee meeting and hear Will working on his variations on *Adeste Fidelis* (the tune for O Come, All Ye Faithful) which is his prelude for Christmas Eve.

Ours is a singing faith. From the hymns that incorporate all of our various voices (and volumes, and pitches, and cadences), to the music that ushers parents and children to and from the baptismal font, to the choir...whether this incredible group...or the somewhat younger version...whose anthems deepen our connection to God and our experience of the themes that run through worship...gathering and singing represents the soul of what we do and who we are as a community in Christ.

I would guess that some of your most potent and powerful memories of church have music as a part of them – candlelight on Christmas Eve while singing *Silent Night*, the brassy notes of *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* on Easter morning. When I would send my kids to church camp, on the ride home in the back seat they never recounted what the devotional was...but they would sing the songs they learned.

I've told many of you this before, but 9-10 years ago on Easter Sunday I decided that I just had to preach a sermon that was a little longer than my usual. As a result of this fateful decision, the television broadcast cut off just a few bars into the choir signing the Hallelujah Chorus. Do you know I didn't get one compliment on my sermon?!? But I got an inbox-full of complaints from television viewers about not being able to hear more Hallelujahs.

The Apostle Paul encourages us to sing as a way of expressing our gratitude and thanksgiving – and, in my experience of being in and a part of the Church – that does make sense to me.

I think about the moments – and you can't script them, they really just happen by the power of the Holy Spirit – but I think about the moments when we sing a hymn together when things just...come alive. When the music and the words and the feeling in the room all coalesce and it becomes obvious that we are sharing

something special...that we are proclaiming something real and important...that we are transcending the broken and cramped patterns of this world to point to another reality...the reality of God’s coming kingdom. That feeling – facilitated by us singing together – is what I think it means to be truly grateful...thankful.

It’s less about a particular thing – its more about a mindset...and a recognition that whatever else is going on, there is a reason for joy and hope and expectation, because we are claimed by God’s love in Jesus Christ and because we are a part of God’s ongoing story and promise...and for that, we are thankful.

One of the most powerful places of thanksgiving in the life of the church happens during memorial services – because it is there, faced with the reality of just how precious and fragile life is...and how sure and certain death is...that, as people of faith, we claim what truly makes us distinctive.

It has been my experience that signing during memorial services gives people access to words that they need but might not otherwise be able to name. And, so, in the church and in the face of death, we stand and sing *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*. And we sing all five verses of *Amazing Grace*. And we sing *Lift High the Cross*. And we do that – even holding the grief and sadness we feel – because gives us access to a kind of gratitude that comes from knowing that we belong – in life and in death – by the mystery and power of resurrection – to the God who created us.

For me, music and singing is especially powerful and needed in the most tragic of memorial services. I share this story with his father’s permission – but I remember one of the hardest memorial services I have done was five-and-a-half years ago for a teenager in our church named Davis. Davis was a bright light – a resilient and joyous young man who lost his life suddenly and tragically the afternoon after Youth Sunday in 2019. In his short 13 years, Davis touched a lot of lives – his family, his friends, his church choir, his youth choir at school. The week of his memorial service was hard and heavy...words did not come easily as we were all shell-shocked and numb.

During his memorial service, the youth choir that Davis had been a part of sang an anthem that captured the spirit of the room. It was a simple refrain, textured by the call and response of different voices...a searing and soaring and spare melody:

I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining.

I believe in love even when I don’t feel it.

I believe in God even when God is silent.

What was so powerful to me about that anthem was that it didn’t attempt to paper over the hurt and confusion we all felt...indeed, it validated those feelings...and it landed us in a place of thanksgiving nonetheless...for Davis’s life, and for God’s love.

Four summers after Davis’s memorial service, I happened to be on a trip to France with my wife Lindsey and our twins. We were spending a few days in Normandy, staying in a historic town called Bayeaux that has a large cathedral at its center. We had been out to eat supper – it was threatening to rain, so I sent Lindsey and the twins back to the hotel while I settled the bill. As I walked from the restaurant to meet my family, I passed by the cathedral where I saw a crowd of people gathering in an archway on the exterior walls of the grounds. I planned on passing by, but then I heard – in English – the words and tune that stopped me in my tracks. A youth choir was signing the anthem that I’d last heard at Davis’s memorial.

I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining.

I believe in love even when I don’t feel it.

I believe in God even when God is silent.

I pulled out my phone, took a video of the performance, wept, and texted Davis’s father, Christian. He wept. And, together – an ocean apart – we shared a needed moment of thanksgiving for Davis’s life and for God’s eternal love.

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If being thankful is dependent on our lives being together enough or happy enough or settled enough – then, yeah...the Apostle Paul is making a tough ask.

If being thankful is about us manufacturing things to celebrate or pretend – then the gratitude will be hollow and short-lived.

But when we remember that thanksgiving is grounded in hope – and in God’s faithful promises...that thanksgiving is connected to the future that is secured by Christ’s love and light...that thanksgiving **can happen** in spite of our fears, and brokenness, and sadness, and grief, and uncertainty – because God accepts and claims and loves us for who we are...and with all we carry...

...**then** we can be thankful.

And with gratitude, we can sing.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.