

There's this story told of two men who were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. Understanding the danger they were in they darted toward the closest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it.

Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!"

John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life."

"But your daddy was a preacher – surely he taught you some sort of prayer! So pray John, pray! The bull is catching up to us."

"All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'" (pause)

Thanksgiving is this week, and so today, I thought we could be giving thanks. Hopefully, not just to give thanks, but to feel thankful.

Some of us don't feel thankful, we feel worried. We feel like the bulls of our life are catching up with us. We feel anxious, concerned, lonely, distressed. (pause)

There's something about this time of year that gets me thinking about family and friends. Thinking about the letters sent this time of year that have sentiments like: "Have a good thanksgiving," or "Be grateful to God..." or "Hope you have a pleasant time with your family..." You know, things like that. To be sure, I love those kinds of letters, but then I thought about my cousin Chan who recently passed away from a heart attack alone in his home. I thought about the person who found him and his family not having him this holiday season. It is sometimes hard to give thanks. (pause)

I've been thinking about reaching out to my high school best friend whose son was home from the army visiting before the holidays last year. He was cleaning his rifle when it accidentally went off killing him instantly. Somehow sending a thanksgiving greeting saying something about remembering to give thanks, this time of year seems cold. It is sometimes hard to give thanks. (pause)

I have some friends whose mom is struggling to remember who they are when they visit. It is sometimes hard to give thanks.

We all hear the reports about the economy and the difficulty getting goods sent around the country causing shortages of goods in some areas. Eating out can be rough depending on the time of day you go due to shortages in workers. It is sometimes hard to give thanks.

(pause)

My nephew Jesse and his wife and kids have all been diagnosed with Covid this past week. They are facing not having a hospital to go to if their symptoms worsen due to shortages in personnel and lack of beds available in the state of North Dakota, where they live. It is sometimes hard to give thanks. (long pause)

Today's scripture has Jesus saying, "Don't worry about your life." So, what is your thanksgiving like? Is it joy and gratitude, or anxiety and worry? Sometimes it is hard to follow the instruction of Jesus and not worry about our lives.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, said something very similar when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

Paul was always giving thanks to God. In another letter, he wrote, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Paul urges us to constantly lift up all sorts of prayers – including prayers of thanksgiving for everyone.

We can fall into the trap of thinking it was easy for Jesus or for Paul or for others to give thanks because they were spiritual giants, they had it all together. Think again.

Paul talked about how difficult his life was in II Corinthians 11:23-28. It wasn't easy. He 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.” (pause)

Yet this is the man who wrote, “Give thanks always!” He meant we should be thankful when things are going great, but he also meant we should be thankful when things are not going our way.

It’s hard to be thankful when someone in our family dies. When our health isn’t so good. When we lose our job or go through a divorce or face a failure in our life. And yet Paul wrote "give thanks in all circumstances."

Paul knew hard times, and he knew he should give thanks to God, even in the most difficult of situations. But it is difficult to be thankful in all situations. (pause)

Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won’t think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this."

Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

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 incredulous, but the rabbi insists. "Do as I say and come back in a week."

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

A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat--only the nine of us." (pause)

Being thankful in all situations isn't simply a matter of having a positive attitude. It is more than simply looking on the bright side.

It is difficult to be thankful when the doctor tells you that you have cancer, or when the teacher gives you a failing grade, or the raise you were needing doesn't come, or when a beloved friend dies. (pause)

There's a traditional hymn for Thanksgiving that was written by a German Pastor, Martin Rinkart. It was written in the 1600's, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years' War. Hundreds of people were dying. The pastor, is said to have buried five thousand of his parishioners in one year, and average of fifteen a day. His parish was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. In the heart of that darkness, with the cries of fear outside his window, 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. (pause)

Thankfulness to God is not simply a self-approached appreciation for the things God does for us, for the things God gives to us.

Thankfulness to God is a God-centered appreciation for the faithfulness of God in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.