

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

Sermon, November 20, 2011
Text: I Thessalonians 5:11-24

"Give thanks in all circumstances," the apostle Paul tells us. I've told this story before, but it's probably my favorite hymn story and bears telling again. The year was 1617. For the next thirty years, wars would rage throughout the German cities and countryside. Germany was the battleground of the Thirty Years War, this decades-long conflict between warring Catholic and Protestant forces; the nation was devastated as a result. Over the next three decades, the population of the country would dwindle from sixteen million to six million. Also in that year of 1617, the year the wars began, Martin Rinkart, the son of a coppersmith from the town of Eilenburg, was ordained as a minister in the German Lutheran Church. He was assigned a pastorate in his hometown of Eilenburg. A walled city, Eilenburg was looked upon as a place of refuge and safety for those thousands of refugees fleeing the ravages of the warring armies during the Thirty Years War. Overcrowded and undersupplied with food, sanitary facilities, and medical care, the walled city eventually became a city of death, instead of a city of refuge. Pestilence raged throughout the crowded streets and homes, eventually claiming thousands of victims.

Martin Rinkart faithfully served his parish throughout the entire three decades of this devastation. In the midst of the constant human suffering all around him, he also composed over sixty hymns of faith and hope, encouraging the people of his parish in Eilenburg to "*give thanks in all circumstances.*" Make no mistake about it, Rinkart's earthly circumstances and those of the people around him were exceedingly difficult. He was no Pollyanna. These people knew *every day* pain and suffering in ways most of us can only begin to imagine. In the year 1636, nineteen years after he arrived, a terrible plague hit the city; during this year all other ministers in the walled town either died or fled. Martin Rinkart alone remained. He buried nearly four thousand five hundred men, women and children, conducting up to forty-five funerals a day, during this plague in 1636. He even buried his beloved and devoted wife.

If you note the lower left hand corner on the page of the hymn we just sang, the author and date of this composition are listed. As you can see, it was in the midst of this terrible plague, in the year 1636, in all probability the year he lost his beloved wife, that Martin Rinkart penned these words: "Now thank we all our God with heart and hand and voices, who wondrous things have done, in whom His world rejoices; who, from our mother's arms, hath blest us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today. O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in His grace and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next." Something lost in the translation is that the original German is a *command*: "NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT!" Pastor Rinkart's words might be better paraphrased: "Now...in the midst of tragedy and suffering and pain ... we *will* thank our God. We will find reason to *give thanks in all circumstances.*"

"*Give thanks in all circumstances!*" Paul writes in our epistle reading today. By the way, in the original Greek that's a command, too. This from a man who was, by his own account, frequently imprisoned, severely flogged, exposed to death again and again, five times receiving the "forty lashes minus one," three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, three times shipwrecked, and on and on! Now, note he does not write, "Give thanks FOR all circumstances." I don't think for a minute that Paul would have exclaimed, "Oh thank you for that flogging! That hurt so good!" Or, "Thank you for that wonderful shipwreck! We didn't need that boat anyway, praise God!" He does not write "give thanks *for* all circumstances; he writes "give thanks *IN* all circumstances."

I really don't believe God requires us to give thanks for our sufferings. However, I do believe God does asks us to find reasons we can be grateful in the midst of our sufferings. I do believe God wants us to nurture an attitude of gratitude and acceptance *in* all things.

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, Roman Catholic theologian Dietrich von Hildebrand was among the first to recognize and denounce the evil of Hitler and Nazism. He became a persona non grata in Germany, he left everything and fled penniless to Vienna where he founded an anti-Nazi newspaper. With the German occupation of Austria in 1938, von Hildebrand then became a political fugitive. Fleeing through Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, Portugal, and Brazil, he eventually arrived in the United States in 1940 where he taught for many years at Fordham University in New York City. He delivered a series of radio addresses entitled "Fundamental Moral Attitudes." Addressing the Moral Attitude of Gratitude, Hildebrand pointed out the proper response to all beneficial gifts is gratitude to God. He also emphasized, however, the proper response to crosses (*i.e., sufferings, burdens, pains, victimizations, forced exiles, etc.*) is not gratitude, but acceptance ... submissive acceptance. Not that one should not try to do something about the cause of sufferings; after all, he was active in resisting the Nazi evil and did not succumb to it. However, he did point out that eventual acceptance was appropriate, as modeled by Jesus in the garden of

Gethsemane. Jesus did not thank God for the cross He was about to endure. He did not thank God for the cup of suffering He was about to drink; in fact, He asked God if the cup might be removed! In Gethsemane, our Lord humbly and submissively voiced His acceptance of imminent suffering by ending His prayer, *"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt."* I believe Jesus was praying in so many words, "If this is my lot in life, if this is what I must do, if this is what I must endure, if this is what I must bear -- if this be Your will for me -- then Father, I accept it, and I trust Your infinite wisdom and goodness. I would like to be relieved of the imminent burden of the Cross; however, not as I will, but as Thou will." Yes, give thanks to God for all good things, even those good things that might result from "crosses." But it is a bad interpretation of I Thessalonians 5:18 to believe God requires us to give thanks *for* the crosses themselves.

Some of you with especially good memories may remember my saying all this November 23, 1997. It was the day before my wife would begin chemotherapy treatments for the cancer first diagnosed in September of that year, the cancer would eventually result in her passing less than two years later. I told you how throughout that time we were somewhat overwhelmed by the support, encouragement, cards/letters, gifts, calls and help offered by so many. In the midst of that ordeal I could say with all sincerity Ann and I were grateful ... we were deeply grateful. Grateful for the blessings she and we had received as a direct result of her illness ... the loving and generous support of so many, especially from this wonderfully supportive congregation. The hundreds of cards, letters, emails, phone calls and the like, the prayers, gifts, meals and help offered, the renewed appreciation I had for just how precious my wife and my family was to me, our deep gratitude for the overwhelming sense of the presence of God in the midst of it all ... I was deeply grateful for all these and more. However, as I told you fourteen years ago, I would have forgone all that in a *heartbeat* if it could have somehow restored Ann's health. I did not thank God for the cancerous cross my wife had to bear ... nevertheless, not as I willed, or as we willed, but as God willed.

God's will for us to give thanks **in** all things is predicated on this undeniable fact of human psychology: Bitterness and anger ... the all-too-common responses to suffering when one does not submissively accept one's crosses ... are *destructive* to the human soul. My favorite quote from that great theologian ... Ann Landers ... is: "Bitterness and anger are acids which destroy their containers from within." Bitterness and anger will corrode you, consume you and eventually destroy you. Bitterness and anger also have a tendency to make us repulsive, unattractive, unpleasant to be around; while humble acceptance and gratitude have a way of making us attractive, pleasant, refreshing to ourselves and to those whose lives we touch.

What is God's will for your life? Paul summarizes for us in today's reading (5:16-18): *"Be joyful always, pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* This is not rocket science. The will of God in Christ Jesus is simply for us to be thankful, to nurture an attitude of gratitude and acceptance. It doesn't require long hours of Bible study or theological degrees to figure all this out and put into practice. It just requires quiet, disciplined, consistent obedience to this gentle divine imperative. Developing the quiet discipline of constantly whispering thanks to God -- no matter the situation -- can really be a mustard seed of life-changing power. And we eventually find it wonderfully changes us.

The sermon title is Command Performance. A command performance, strictly speaking, is defined as an occasion that one is obliged to attend or a duty one is to obliged to carry out, as in, "My boss's invitations to dinner are always a command performance." Your boss invites you to dinner, you better show up and you better be on your best behavior if you like having your job! This term originated in the 1800s, when it denoted a theatrical or musical performance presented at the behest of a sovereign or head of state. The king wanted to see, say, the Royal Ballet tomorrow night, well, the king would see the Royal Ballet tomorrow night ... and they best be at their top performance! By the 1930s the term was also used figuratively for any more or less obligatory occasion or performance. A command performance is a performance of duty carried out because of a command from someone above; it is something one had better carry out no matter how one may feel. And more times than not, a "command performance" will bring out the very best in us.

Gratitude is a command performance. It is a delightful duty we carry out in response to a loving command from our Sovereign. Giving thanks is probably the most effective, yet underrated, spiritual discipline there is. People who consistently exercise this discipline of being grateful often go on to just bubble and overflow like a fountain of refreshment, nourishing themselves and others. Too many people, even too many Christians, follow the usual lazy downward spiral of negativity, which is a sucking and destructive vortex. It's easy to complain, it's easy to harp on what's wrong, but it's so, well, unattractive, repulsive, even ugly. Truly grateful people are a delight to God, an attractive delight to others and a beautiful delight to themselves. *"...give thanks in ALL circumstances, for this is the God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT! Amen.