

Thanks in All Circumstances

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ~ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18 (NIV)

How do we transition from thanking God *for* something to thanking God *in* something? Showing gratitude to God for what He has given you could be considered good manners and politeness. This is all good, but my heart of thanksgiving wants to express something much deeper. I want to be thankful in all circumstances.

I try to teach my children to be thankful. One of the ways I do this is to use the language of “for.” What are you thankful *for*? We thank God *for* _____, and we fill in the blank with what we are thankful for. This is pretty fundamental in the understanding of gratitude. But what happens when we go through challenging circumstances? It might be hard to thank God for those things. This is why we are challenged to give thanks in all circumstances. We may not be able to say thank you for it, but we can be thankful in it. You don't have to feel grateful to be grateful. Remember that gratitude isn't just about a feeling; it is about action.

I do not know what circumstances you might be in right now. You may not want to be in them. But when we give thanks in them, it isn't about thanking God for the circumstance, but about naming who God is in the midst of it. We would never willingly say, “God, thank you FOR this terrible circumstance.” However, I believe we can still be thankful IN it. We are just thankful for something much different. We may not give God thanks for the pain, but we give thanks that in the pain, God heals. We struggle to give thanks for loss, but we know that in loss we can be thankful for the comfort of God. These are just a few examples, but I am sure you can think of some more. Wherever you are, and whatever you are in, be thankful.

Lord, help me to be thankful in all circumstances, not because of them, but because of who you are in them. Amen.

REV. MICHAEL SMITH
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Let us...

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

~ Hebrews 10:24

Never-Ending Love

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ~ PHILIPPIANS 3:14 (NIV)

After I read this Scripture, something looked familiar. It was 3:14, so I searched online. I found out that Pi 3.14 is a number used to find the area and circumference of a circle. Circles never end. Also, 3.14 is the result of a number that is rounded down because it never ends (3.14159265...). I am not a math genius, so I really don't understand it, and I don't know why it stood out to me.

What I do understand is that Jesus has everlasting love for me. His love never ends. He went to the cross to forgive my sins — not just one time but every time I ask for forgiveness for my sins. He is never going to change; He's always going to love me.

Father God, I am so glad that your love goes 'round and 'round and never ends. I don't know where I would be if I didn't have you.

KIM TORTELLA

PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Symbols of Lent

During Lent, we use symbols that relate to the themes of the season: the themes of repentance, renewal, hope, and joy.

Colors are symbolic. Violet signifies suffering and sorrow; white is for purity and glory; green means growth and hope of eternal life; pink or rose represents joy.

A **bare branch** symbolizes Jesus' death on a wooden cross. It also reminds us that out of seeming lifelessness comes new life, both in nature and in the resurrection.

The **butterfly** symbolizes new life and is commonly used to help children begin to understand the meaning of Easter. Out of a dead-looking cocoon emerges creation, free and exuberant.

Salt is necessary to sustain life and is a symbol of wholeness. We use salt as a preservative to keep food wholesome. We also use it to enhance the flavor.

Water has always been a symbol of cleansing and life-giving in the Church and is commonly associated with baptism. In Scripture, Jesus speaks of Himself as the "life-giving water" (John 4:14), the One who quenches our spiritual thirst.

It's the Small Things That Mean the Most

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

~ MATTHEW 25:37-40 (RSV)

Well, we are entering the third year of this pandemic, known as COVID 19. Things continue to be uncertain — get vaccinated, don't get vaccinated; wear a mask, don't wear a mask; have in-person classes, have virtual classes.

With all the isolation, so many people are feeling lonely, many don't have enough food, some can't pay their medical bills, and some children didn't receive a Christmas gift because money was tighter than normal. The difficulties go on and on.

Times like this give us even more opportunity to reach out to help our suffering communities. Yes, I know many of you tithe and others give a significant portion of their limited income to the church. To those people, we say thank you for adhering to God's desire for sacrificial giving.

For those who don't have funds to spare, consider overcooking for your family and giving the leftovers to a shut-in, mail a card with a note inside saying you miss the person, or offer to shop for them next time you go shopping for yourself. Believe me, the thank you or smile from the person makes you feel there is hope for our country to reunite and to treat others as we would have them treat us.

Our heavenly Father, help us realize how much it means when we give so little to some people. Don't let those of us who are fortunate take things for granted, but help us reach out to the less fortunate and make a difference. It is nice to receive thanks, but important for us to give thanks for the blessings we have. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

FRED TOMLIN

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF GLASSBORO



Let us...

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

~ Galatians 6:9

Tears – A Gift from God

When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled. “Where have you put him?” he asked them. They told him, “Lord, come and see.” Then Jesus wept. ~ JOHN 11:32-35 (NLT)

Arriving at college with a few hundred other students, I was amazed at the near frenzy of screaming students as they saw and greeted each other after being separated for the summer break. Happiness ruled the day. There were tears, happy ones.

On another day, a 96-year-old woman died. Family and friends were surprised that their tears flowed freely. Why? She had been in poor health, not eating much the last few days. Usually, with a smile on her face, she would have something to tell about life in the present. Now she was gone.

Tears are an expression of feelings. Jesus, too, lost a good friend, and He wept. When babies are born, they cry. When hungry or feeling distress, they cry. When older, they cry when disciplined over wrongdoings. When a mother listens to her child recite vows of matrimony, she may feel tears welling up, a mixture of happiness for her child and sadness that the bond once shared now belongs to another.

Tears are not to be shunned but to be accepted as a part of life. They are God’s gift to us.

Dear Lord, happiness and sadness come to each of us. Help us remember that you are with us in each situation. Amen.

CAROL PHILLIPS

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

UNITED METHODIST COMMUNITIES AT PITMAN



Let us...

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

~ Hebrews 4:16

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your decrees. ~ PSALM 119:63-64 (NIV)

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ~ 1 JOHN 4:7-8 (NIV)

Remember what Christ endured going to the cross for us all — how much love He showed for us who are yet sinners. We need to show love for others. Is that the same as really loving others? How much do we really love those who go against God's Word and parade their sins in front of us? Do we love them enough to show them God's words — not our words, but God's — to help them achieve a better understanding of our Lord? Do we love them enough to show them our Jesus, who withstood ridicule, harsh treatment, and the horrible cross to save those who are willing to follow Him and all His teachings in the Bible? No greater love and friend is there anywhere!

Proverbs 18:24 tells us there are friends who are not good to each other and some who are like brothers. There are times when we feel all alone — even when there are others around us. It's great when we find a good friend who listens and really cares through the good times and the hard times. Are there people who would like to have you for a good friend — good enough to help them whenever they are following the wrong path? Do we talk to God about it? Do we ask Him if there is someone who needs us as a good friend?

Dear Lord who bears our sins and griefs, take us in your arms and shield us to find a solace there.

SANDY HAWN-HANES
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Let us...

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue
but with actions and in truth.

~ 1 John 3:18

God Has a Plan

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

~ ESTHER 4:14 (NIV)

Have you ever wondered why you are where you are in life? Are you there because of *your* efforts or because God has put you there for a purpose? Having just finished 20 years of education, it's easy for me to think that I am where I am because of *my* efforts, but how can I be sure? Maybe God has put me in this situation because there is someone I need to reach or something I need to do. Maybe God has a plan for me.

Esther was a poor Jewish orphan girl whom God chose to use. He had a plan for her, and she didn't even realize it! Mordecai, her uncle, did. When he heard of the destiny of the Jews, he told Esther that perhaps this is why God put her where she is. She went before the king, exposed Haman, and saved the Jews.

Two things happened here. First, God put Esther in a position where He could use her. Second, Esther took a stand and did what God needed her to do.

Maybe you are where you are because God put you there. Maybe there is something God needs you to do. Are you willing to do it? I once heard a pastor say that he wasn't comfortable saying, "God has a plan for you." Instead he said, "God has a plan, and you're in it."

Mordecai told Esther if she didn't stand up for the Jews, relief and deliverance would come from another place. God had a plan, and He was inviting her to be part of it. Esther had to choose, and so do we. God can use our lives to the benefit of His kingdom, but we need to be willing. We may suffer some ridicule or embarrassment, but is that so bad? Esther's life was at stake, yet she was faithful.

Ask God to use you at work, school, home, or wherever you are and see if He doesn't. Remember: God has a plan, and you're in it!

JASON HANEY
GREAT VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

This was reprinted from a 1998 Lenten devotional book when Jason attended Evangelical United Methodist Church in Clarksboro, NJ.

How Many of Us Live by Faith?

The Centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed." ... When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel." ~ MATTHEW 8:8,10 (NKJV)

READ MATTHEW 8:5-10

I enjoy old movies, particularly inspirational ones. I'm referring to the one I recently watched, *Come to the Stable*, with Loretta Young and Celeste Holm, from a story by Clare Booth Luce.

I was fascinated by the faith of these two nuns who had served in World War II. During the war, they witnessed poor children having no access to emergency or selective care. They returned to the United States dedicated to building a children's hospital. In view of her story, Luce must have had phenomenal faith.

The nuns needed supplies, ground, funds, a place for headquarters, and people to work. Preceded by earnest prayer, all their requests were miraculously supplied by people they contacted. Even a self-absorbed bookie mob boss complied after observing the faith of these nuns. They believed God would provide all and He did. Is this just a story, or do people live that faith?

Do I have that kind of faith? Do I walk forward, believing even in impossible odds? So, where is my faith today? Would Jesus say, "I've not found such great faith" about me? I don't know. I want to believe I have such faith.

Precious Lord, when confronted, help me to exhibit the great faith you have given me. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

PASTOR SHERRY ZAPPOLA, RETIRED
LIVING HOPE WORSHIP CENTER



Let us...

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

~ Hebrews 12:1