

## Coping when your world darkens

**From St Paul: “Give thanks always for all things to God.”**

**William Law once wrote, “If anyone could tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing...., you could not do more for yourself than by this thankful spirit; for it turns all that it touches into happiness.”**

**Is it possible to be thankful for everything as St. Paul teaches or is this just naivety?**

**Truth to tell we are incredibly blessed here in Canada. Most of us are grateful for the food we eat, good friends, family, loved ones, health and vitality.**

**But for many of us there is this new unease, this knowing that all is not well. We watch the world get hotter. We wonder what it will be like for our children to live 25 years from now. And world peace has been broken by Israel and Hamas and by Russia invading Ukraine. Both are deeply irrational wars with no need for either, yet they go on one terrifying day after another. With this dread snapping at our heels can we really get into giving thanks for everything?**

**How can we give thanks and why should we bother? Why not just grin and bear it? If things are so bad should why would we even want to be thankful?**

**Isn't this counter intuitive in the extreme?**

**History is a great thing to remember at times like these, for things have been much worse than we are experiencing today. Once I came across the history of the writing of my favorite hymn. The thirty years war in Europe was one of the darkest times in European history. There was ongoing violence, pillage, famine and finally the plague. In one year pastor Rinkart officiated over nearly 5 thousand funerals. Here is the history:**

**“German pastor Martin Rinkart served in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. The fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great**

Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkhart officiated at the funerals of the other two. As the only pastor left, he often conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day—some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died.

What was Pastor Rinkart reaction to all this death?

One evening Pastor Rinkart wrote down the following words for his motherless children to offer as a grace to be said after a meal:

Now thank we all our God  
With hearts and hands and voices;  
Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom this world rejoices.  
Who, from our mother's arms,  
Hath led us on our way,  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.

As I read about this faithful man of God, I thought to myself, **now that is faith, incredible faith, however do we get there??...**

When Robert Schuller was a child there was a dustbowl in Iowa. His father would normally harvest 100 wagon loads of corn but that year the harvest was a meager one half wagon load. Schuller writes: “I will never forget it. Seated at the Thanksgiving dinner table with his calloused hands holding ours my father looked up and thanked God. He said: “I thank you God that I have lost nothing. For I have regained the seed I have planted in the spring time...”. Schuller says that his father said “Never count up ‘the might have beens’ or you’ll be defeated. Never look at what you have lost, look at what you have left. Thank God for everything that happens to you.”

Here at Knox, I once had the privilege of meeting psychologist Wayne Dyer and having some time with him. On the night he came to the church he told the story of his father and his gratitude for him. He said; “Perhaps the single most significant person in my life, the one person who made the greatest difference for me and my own spiritual development, is a person who by all accounts was a petty tyrant. He abandoned his family, spent time in prison as a criminal and was abusive towards his wife. At the age of 49 he died from

the excessive use of alcohol. Dyer says what he learned from his father was **what he had to transcend**. When Dyer found himself slipping into behaviors that destroyed his father's life, he reminded himself that was not his path. Interestingly he was grateful for his father's negative example because it served as a mechanism to keep his own life on track.

Dyer says: "All people, and I do mean **all people** are in your life to teach you valuable lessons... get the message, give thanks, move on."

What is your reaction to these statements about giving thanks in everything? Do you still have honest doubts like me? Let's work at this a little more... there is something interesting...is it crazy to want to be well physically, mentally and spiritually; **because there are health implications for not being grateful for everything?** According to the best research, we get better by seeking peace and letting go of our responses of fear and guilt and anger. Gratefulness does that faster than anything else, so perhaps gratitude as a reaction to adversity is not quite so crazy after all? Is that why pastor Rinkhart survived when all around him fell like flies? Was it his faith in God and giving thanks for everything that happened to him that gave him an edge that boosted his immune system?

Here is another point. We know that it is not possible to absolutely know the future, even although we might hazard good guesses. But note this: **if we give thanks for everything that happens to us in the *present*, we pave the way for accepting it in the future**. For in the future it may come about that, the thing that we were upset about, may actually be a blessing in disguise. **Present suffering may lead to future blessing.**

Not everything we think of as loss may in the end be so. Like that person you might have married and you know now that it would have been a disaster/ or that investment you wanted to make that seemed like such a good idea at the time and your spouse talked you out of it and now you are more than grateful that he/she did because the bottom fell out of the market? What about that job that you thought that you had to have and it turned out that the person who took it failed because of circumstances beyond her control and the business folded? Have you ever said '**There but for the grace of God go I**' and been profoundly grateful? I have many times in my life...

Why is it that gratitude might work to keep us healthy? I think because when we give gratitude to God for things we think are negative, **we are releasing them and all the stress that goes with it**. We also do not go down into the

mire of victim hood where we are of no use to anyone else. Instead, we can choose to maintain a positive can/do attitude. Being grateful immediately shifts that down mood.

As we all know, in these days of climate change, tornadoes are increasing in number and intensity.

Once a tornado touched down on the Schuller farm. The family only had enough time to get into their car and drive for their lives! They lost everything- all 9 building were gone including the farm house. Everything they had worked for years... gone. Once again father Schuller gave thanks to God saying. "I thank-you God that not a life was lost." So often I hear that said by people who have lost everything they own, to a tornado. They are interviewed and they say "We are grateful that no life was lost. We can rebuild...",

Father Schuller went into town and bought an old house that was to be demolished. They took it apart board by board and rebuilt it over the basement of the previous home. By refusing to be a victim old man Schuller taught his son that gratitude can be the greatest can/do energizer of them all. He used the loss to stimulate his creativity and let it put gas in his tank.

Schuller learned from his father well. When Joyce Brothers was here, she told me: "I admire Robert Schuller greatly. When I first knew him his church was in a drive in movie theatre. Even then he told me that one day he was going to build a glass cathedral. Now look at him. He did everything he said he would. He is truly amazing!"

What Joyce perhaps did not know was the family history; of Schuller's father who insisted on giving thanks to God for everything- no exceptions! There is one more point I want you to take home.

What is it that lies behind giving thanks for all things that is the pearl of great price? What is the gift that sustains them all, the gift behind all gifts for which we can be thankful no matter what?

Jesus tells us a parable of a merchant who discovers a pearl in the marketplace. He instantly realizes its value and sells all he has to purchase it. Why does Jesus tell this parable? **Just what is the pearl of great price?**

Executive coach Jan Thompson Eve from San Diego lost her husband to cancer after a long fight. She decided to go to a health spa. There she was

surrounded by beauty but she was sad of heart. The time of year was Thanksgiving and she could not imagine spending it with anyone she knew, so she went away in order to surrounded herself with strangers. Giving thanks was completely beyond her. She felt like a burned-out survivor of a drawn-out war after the long care experience with her dying husband.

She was 54 years old and for her the future looked completely bleak. She asked the concierge if there was anyone at the Spa who had recently lost a husband. The concierge replied that the director of the Spa had lost her husband several months before.

Jan sat down with Director Phyllis at lunch and they began to talk. Phyllis spoke about her husband and Jan could tell by her stories that the relationship had been happy and warm. When it came to her turn she could only cry quietly as she related her husband's battle with cancer and chronic pain.

Jan asked Phyllis what she had done to cope with the crushing grief. Obviously, she had been doing something right because she was so full of vitality and joy after such a short time. Phyllis had described her travels around the world with sparkling eyes and her plans for the next year.

Jan noted silently the complete contrast between her and Phyllis and so she asked her the question uppermost in her own mind: "Did you ever feel like you were just waiting to die? I don't mean suicide. I just mean feeling like you were just going through the motions with no future and no purpose."

Phyllis said emphatically: "No, never!"

Then she shared that she had lived in Java as a little girl where her father was a Shell Oil exec. One day the Japanese came to the door and took him away with a bayonet in his back. Her mother, little Phyllis and her young brother were all taken to a Japanese prison camp. They all but died there of starvation. Every day Phyllis' mother said to her: "They can take away our food and our freedom **but they cannot take away our love of life**. If we let them do that they have won."

"And that is why as awful as it was to lose my husband and have to go on without him, **I have decided that I will never lose my love of life.**"

Jan felt a rush of awareness inside, a recognition that this was a deciding point of her life. Phyllis had been through so much more than she, yet she had chosen to fully live her life! Two images flashed before her of the way she could be: An inspiring happy, thankful woman, whose heart was filled with joy and peace; or a woman in a cocoon, sitting on the sidelines, full of sorrow, not really living but merely existing.

What had Jan discovered? The pearl of great price, the gift behind all gifts- she could always, no matter what happened, be grateful for the gift of her life and then **love life**, no matter what came her way. That what Jesus was teaching us. Loving Life is the pearl of great price...

If we decide to love life anyway, no matter what, then I think that it follows that we will be healed by **giving thanks always, for everything, to God, and be lifted out of our darkness and distress into the light and peace of God's presence. Amen.**