

“Choosing Gratitude”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, November 19, 2017

Eileen Spinelli’s classic book *Thanksgiving at the Tappletons*¹ begins with the Tappleton family on a cold November day, preparing for their traditional Thanksgiving meal of turkey, mashed potatoes, salad, and pie.

It was still dark when Mrs. Tappleton lit the oven and took the big turkey out of the refrigerator. Just then, the milkman knocked on the door to suggest that Mrs. Tappleton try his eggnog. As she was reaching for the eggnog, she dropped the turkey. On any other day, it might have been okay, but on this particular Thanksgiving Day, the steps were covered with ice, and before she knew it the turkey slid down the icy steps and slithered into the frost-covered yard.

“Grab it!” screamed Mrs. Tappleton to the milkman. The milkman gave chase to the turkey and Mrs. Tappleton ran after the milkman—but the turkey kept sliding down the hill in front of their house toward the pond at the bottom of the hill. It hit the water with a plop and sank, bubbling out of sight. So much for the turkey for the family’s Thanksgiving feast!

But there was still the mashed potatoes. In the Tappleton family, this job was always given to the Tappleton daughter, Jenny Tappleton. Now, while the family went to pick up Grandmother Tappleton at the airport, Jenny peeled the potatoes and boiled them. She thought she’d try using the blender this time, to make the potatoes extra creamy. She put the potatoes in the blender and started the machine. All was going well, until the phone rang. It was her best friend, and she got to talking and forgot about the potatoes in the blender—until she felt a splat on her face. The blender’s lid had flown off; the blender was going wild and so were the potatoes, all over the kitchen. So much for the mashed potatoes for the family’s Thanksgiving feast!

Later that day, the Tappleton son, Kenny Tappleton, was supposed to make the salad, but the trouble was that he had given the lettuce and carrots to his pet rabbits the day before. So much for the salad for the family’s Thanksgiving feast!

Still, there was pie to pick up at the bakery, and that was Mr. Tappleton’s job. But there was a long line of people picking up baked goods, and when he finally got to the front, they were all out of pies.

As the various Tappleton culinary mishaps occurred, each person decided not to tell the rest of the family, assuming that their contribution would not be missed when the rest of the feast was placed on the table.

So of course, when they all sat down to eat—the table was bare. One after another, they confessed the various calamities. No turkey. No mashed potatoes. No salad. No pie. No Thanksgiving feast!

Kenny Tappleton sighed, “There’s nothing to say a prayer for.”

“Nonsense,” responded Grandmother Tappleton, “there’s always something to say a prayer for.” And so she prayed:

*Turkeys come and turkeys go
And trimmings can be lost, we know.
But we’re together; that’s what matters,
Not what’s served upon the platters.*

Then the Tappletons dined on cheese sandwiches and pickles and canned applesauce. They feasted on the bounty of family and laughter and life itself. It was a most amazing banquet!

Grandmother Tappleton was right: “There’s always something to say a prayer for.” The Apostle Paul agreed with Grandmother Tappleton when he exhorted or urged the church in Thessalonica: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

“Give thanks in all circumstances.” Note carefully that Paul did *not* write, “Give thanks for all circumstances.” Many bad things happen in life: frustrated plans, tragedies, evil actions, illnesses, and of course, death. No, Paul did not urge the Thessalonians to give thanks for all the circumstances of life; rather, he urged them to give thanks *in* all circumstances.

How could he do this? How could he urge the Thessalonians, who were going through a rough time, to give thanks? He could do this because Paul knew that, as Christians, we are not defined by—or confined by—our circumstances; on the contrary, we can rise above our circumstances—no matter how bad—because we know that *God is always for us*. And because we know that *God is for us*, we can live lives characterized by hope rather than despair; by love rather than hate; by kindness rather than malice; by compassion rather than apathy; by joy rather than sorrow. And the key to it all? Gratitude. *Gratitude that God is always for us*. Constant, unending gratitude is the key to living the life God desires for us—the life Paul described in Romans 8 as being “super-conquerors.” It all comes from gratitude.

But let me share a crucial truth. Developing an attitude of gratitude has nothing to do with feelings. Feelings come and go; feelings are fickle. No, gratitude is not a *feeling*; it is a *choice*. *An act of the will*.

The celebrated historian and theologian Diana Butler Bass wrote a beautiful prayer for Thanksgiving last November that expresses this understanding of gratitude.² Let me share it with you.

God, there are days we do not *feel* grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak, confusing. God, we struggle to *feel* grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we *choose* gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, grateful for their stories and struggles, and we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating and accepting them for who they are. We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted, whatever our differences, or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the stage of the future of humankind and creation.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not *give* thanks. We *choose* it. We will make this choice of thanks with courageous hearts, knowing that it is humbling to say, “thank you.” We choose to see your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we all are guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received. We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we *choose* grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere. In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude onto the world.

Thus, with you, and with all those gathered at this table, we pledge to *make* thanks. We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future. Around our family table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.

We *choose* gratitude.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Eileen Spinelli, *Thanksgiving at the Tappletons* (HarperCollins 1984).

² Diana Butler Bass, “A Thanksgiving Prayer for 2016: Choose Gratitude,” *Huffington Post* (November 22, 2018).