

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May He strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones.”

When I was a youngster, 9 to 12 or 13 I delivered the local newspaper six days a week. I delivered to all of downtown, which consisted of the local candy, package, jewelry, and furniture stores; two clothing stores, five bar-rooms and, assorted other local businesses. Then I delivered on two other streets at the edge of town, which were all family homes. Near the end of my route on Spring St. lived Mrs. Scott. A widow lady about 75 to 80 years of age, Mrs. Scott lived in one of the downstairs apartments of a large house Mr. Malone converted into four apartments. There were two apartments upstairs and two down stairs.

Living alone Mrs. Scott never went very far. Mainly she drove herself to the grocery store and to church. The only other place she would go is with the senior group from town when they would drive up to the city to watch a live filming of “The Lawrence Welk Show.” She loved Lawrence Welk.

Every day I would deliver her newspaper, and almost every day without fail Mrs. Scott would ask me to stop and sit and have a drink and a snack. Every day she would ask me to either sit outside with her or if it was cold she would ask me to sit with her in her kitchen. She would always say something like “you look tired today” or “you need to come in and warm up.” Always making it out like I needed a break.

Without fail Mrs. Scott always gave me a glass of soda and a cupcake or piece of cake or a brownie. Something she bought from the store. I don't ever remember her giving me something she made. We would sit I would eat and drink while we talked. She told me about her life, about her husband, about her daughter, and much about her growing up in a family that had no modern conveniences such as electricity or running water; me about my day.

I also remember how every year on my birthday and at Christmas she always gave me a present. I received extra money from most of my customers at Christmas and some even a present, but Mrs. Scott always gave me something special. It would be a sweater or maybe a jacket, but always something to help keep me warm. I knew she did not have extra money for the type of gifts she gave me and I would always refuse them, but she would always insist and then offer me a snack and something to drink.

One day in mid-March or early April I believe, I was delivering Mrs. Scott's newspaper, but something was different. Mr. Malone, the landlord was working on Mrs. Scott's door and some lady was there with him. Mr. Malone finished taking off the screen door and was attempting to unlock the door with his skeleton key when he realized Mrs. Scott had her key in on the other side.

Mr. Malone then asked me if I had seen Mrs. Scott and said no, but maybe she went off with her senior group. The lady standing there said she had not gone off or she would have told her. I ask “Who are you?” and she replied “her daughter.” Looking around Mr. Malone found an unlocked window but it was too high for either of them to climb in so Mr. Malone helped me up and through the window and I unlocked the door to let them in. They found Mrs. Scott in her room where she had passed in her sleep.

Many days following the funeral I received a visit from Mrs. Scott’s daughter and she told me something about Mrs. Scott I never expected. See when the holidays drew near, her apartment had no tree, no presents, and no stockings. For her, Christmas was just another day on the calendar, and that always bothered me. Her daughter explained how her and her husband always wanted her to come live with them, but she said she could not leave.

Every year my mom would have me go buy a Christmas card, with my own money, which I had trouble with, and she would have me sign it and deliver to Mrs. Scott when I delivered her paper. Every year was the same thing I give her the Christmas card she opened the card and read its contents and would begin to cry.

Her daughter told me she found a shoebox under her bed and in it was every Christmas card I had given to her mother. She said she knew her mother loved me because she always talked about our talks and that she found snack cakes and soft drinks in the cupboard which she would never eat due to health reasons. She said her mother looked forward to late afternoons when she would sit and listen to what was going on in my life and her daughter said her mother prayed for me every night.

This story provides a perfect entrance to our Advent season, which we begin today. In essence the story is one of thanksgiving, a young boy's thanksgiving for a woman and her thanksgiving for him. A lesson which can be drawn from our 1 Thessalonians passage, Paul presents us with another message of thanksgiving, but one that is specific in giving thanks through our giving.

Paul wrote 1st Thessalonians, believed one of his first letters, approximately in the year 50 AD. Paul started this Christian community at Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. In the short passage we read the apostle offers thanks to the Thessalonians. He is grateful for them and the faith for which they have demonstrated, but he wants to suggest certain ways that thanksgiving must be manifested.

First, Paul suggests that thanksgiving must be an act of presence; he believes we demonstrate thanks to each other by being physically present with one another. As a nation, we in the United States just completed the celebration of our national day of Thanksgiving. Many people gathered with families and friends; we were kind of present with each other, sort of. We intentionally sought to be with certain people at this special time, kind of. Many people traveled great distances; one might say we went out of our way to be present to special people in our lives. We made these journeys joyfully because these are people we know and love. We welcomed the opportunity.

However, Paul's concept of presence as an action of thanksgiving requires more of us than we may realize. Being an excellent judge of human character, Paul realized that to be present to people we know, like, or love can be of advantage to us and is not really difficult at all. He realized the need, and so must we, move beyond being present simply to those we like, but in an act of thanksgiving, to be present to those we know and possibly do not like. At times I was not too pleased to be sitting with Mrs. Scott, as it was time I originally saw as wasted, but I learned about the importance of being present with people, especially to those who needed my time most.

Equally importantly I discovered the peace and beauty that came to me through this act of thanksgiving. I later found that I was serving not only the individual, but I was serving a God who gives us the opportunity to be present and serve.

Being present can manifest itself in many different ways. We need to take up God's challenge and be thankful by visiting a neighbor, a colleague at work, or a member of our community, not just church members, who are sick, whether in the hospital or at home. Giving of the time we believe we do not possess to be present with another and simply stop, sit and listen is one of the greatest gifts we could give; almost a lost art in today's world. Many times all people need is simply a listening compassionate ear. We need to be present with those in need, with the elderly, we need to be present with our own family members most assuredly, but we also need to be present with those we just became acquainted with. We need to be present for special events - birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings, but also we need to be present for the everyday events, being present for meals, homework, special events of children, and family time together is essential.

Paul is asking the Thessalonians to be present with each other and thereby demonstrate thanksgiving every day. The same is true for us. This let's those struggling know there is hope, which is the first candle of Advent, which we lit earlier.

A second aspect of Paul's concept of thanksgiving is mutual love. He writes in **1Thessalonians 3:12**, "*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.*"

As the first season of the new liturgical year, Advent presents us the opportunity for new beginnings, to start fresh in demonstrating mutual love. If we are at odds with someone it is the perfect time to once again demonstrate the love to which all Christians are called to have and show. Jesus never held a grudge. In fact, we recall his words in **Luke 23:34**, while on the cross, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*" Disagreements arise within families, coworkers, neighbors, and even within our church families. Paul's words encourage us to "bury the hatchet" and move toward reconciliation and love. Still Christians must go further. We must all be willing to reach across borders and the boundaries which separate and drive people apart. Racial and ethnic divisions, national

boundaries, and even denominational teachings which keep us from being the mutually loving people that is part of Paul's thanksgiving message to the Thessalonians.

Instead of division and strife we should offer love as the concept of belonging, unity, and harmony. A thanksgiving of mutual love requires us to be inclusive in all we do and say. Jesus continually crossed borders, both literally and figuratively, to demonstrate inclusiveness with all people. He visited lands and cities outside Israel, such as Tyre, Sidon, and the Gerasene Territory. He never shied away from lepers, cripples, the blind, or others with physical handicaps. On the contrary, Jesus embraced these people, demonstrating an ethic of being all inclusive.

Rather than being inclusive, too often people in contemporary life are exclusive. We choose our friends, our opportunities, and our associations with great care. Only certain people or possibilities which pass our personal test show up on our radar screens. People are chosen based on their attributes, skills, and the possibilities they bring into our lives. Opportunities similarly are chosen if they will only advance our personal or professional lives or serve us in an advantageous way.

The thanksgiving effort of mutual love that Paul preaches to the Thessalonians is completely opposing to such an exclusive way of thinking or acting.

Paul's third aspect of thanksgiving is proper conduct. He writes in **1 Thessalonians 3:13**, "*And may He so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*" The new start which Advent brings challenges us to transform our lives of faith and make them more conformable to that of Christ. Many of us use this time of new beginnings to root out vices which harm our health - smoking, overeating, excessive drinking, or laziness. It is a time to also seek to cast out hatred, jealousy, pride, pettiness, envy, and entitlement those things which create discord and violence in our lives, and replace them with justice, goodness, humility, kindness, and those things that generate peace.

In short, we must root out actions which are inconsistent with Christian values. As our closing hymn goes, "*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.*" We must find peace in our hearts by doing what is right. Right conduct leads directly to peace within our hearts.

As we begin a new liturgical year by lighting the first candle of hope on the Advent wreath, Paul encourages us to develop an attitude of thanksgiving and hope. While saying “thank you” in a physical sense is a start, we must go further. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he is grateful for them, but now they must demonstrate a life of thanksgiving of presence, of mutual love, and right conduct to others. Similarly, we need to manifest thanksgiving and hope in our lives. People need us to be present to them; people, all people have the right to our love and respect. Society and God challenge us to reform our lives more along that of Jesus Christ. Let our Advent journey begin today by being thankful. Our attitude can be so simply stated, as articulated by a favorite of mine, Saint Ignatius of Loyola when he said, “*May all we do and say give greater glory and honor to God.*” How far are you willing to go?