

When I was a child, I was very reluctant to leave Sunday worship with the other children. I did not like going to the front of church to hear a lesson before being whisked off to Sunday School. I never really latched on to the idea of Sunday School itself when I was perfectly content to remain with my parents in worship singing the songs and listening to the sermon. Most Sundays, I was able to evade the underage exodus to points beyond and to find my way back into the pew. My aversion to Sunday school may have had to do with an incident that my dad loved to retell about my precociousness as a child.

As you can imagine, the Sunday School teacher has the divine tasking of wrangling children into quietness and attentiveness in order for the children to receive their faith formation. But there was one particular class in which the teacher's repeated shush-ing of the children was met with a continuing cacophony.

As the voices children's continued to amplify, and seeing that the teacher was in need of assistance, I did what I thought would be helpful. . . by blurting out a colorful expletive—the kind of expletive that is of the bovine excrement variety.

Needless to say, the astonished Sunday School teacher turned to me and said, "Robin! What did you say?" And thinking that she must not have heard me clearly over the children's voices, I said it again, but this time even louder and prouder. And so, the Sunday school teacher asked me if I knew what that word meant. At least I thought I knew what it meant as I had learned it. I said to her, "My daddy says that's the Spanish word for 'Shhh.'"

Despite my efforts to remain in Sunday worship, there was the occasional Sunday in which I was promised there would be singing in Sunday School—a continuation of the Wednesday night children's choir practice. Despite the direction we were given into becoming one united voice praising God, I would compose alternative lyrics to the songs we were singing, and then whisper those lyrics to the kids on either side of me.

I vividly remember an instance of getting in trouble for changing just a single word to a praise song, and it was due to the influence of Shadoe Stevens, the DJ of American Top 40 and of Hollywood Squares fame. In the early years of his career in media, Shadoe Stevens had a recurring character in television commercials for The Federated Group, a chain of stores that sold name-brand electronics like cassette decks and Betamax players. These commercials were silly, juvenile, and just over the top with nonsense. But they were embedded in my childhood brain. I was continually drunk with the jingles and sound effects of television commercials and I had no hesitation in mimicking what I had seen and heard.

Shadoe Stevens through his character, Dr. Fred Rated, commanded that “everybody laugh,” and through this call and response, people laughed on cue: “HAHAHAHA!” Through these commercials, I learned the word, “federate,” thinking that to “federate” was to make something funny and so the song we sang as a children’s choir, “Celebrate the Lord,” very easily became “Federate the Lord. Everybody laugh! HAHAHAHA!” and our choir director found nothing funny about that at all.

There is a children’s song that speaks to the first part of today’s scripture lesson in Ephesians. It begins:

O be careful little eyes what you see

And it goes on to say,

O be careful little ears what you hear.

O be careful little hands what you do.

O be careful little feet where you go.

O be careful little mouth what you say . . .

There's a Father up above

And He's looking down in love

So, be careful. . .

In other words, take care and responsibility in how you conduct yourself. It’s a lesson that applies to every age and stage of life, but as we explore the passage beyond being simply being careful with ourselves, we might notice that the apostle presents us with the challenge of giving thanks to God even while living through challenging times.

Let’s hear this scripture once more but this time through the lens of The Message translation:

So watch your step. Use your head. Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times!

Don't live carelessly, unthinkingly. Make sure you understand what the Master wants.

Don't drink too much wine. That cheapens your life. Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs! Sing songs from your heart to Christ. Sing praises over everything, any excuse for a song to God the Father in the name of our Master, Jesus Christ.

If you were to turn to the front of your red hymnal that details John Wesley's directions for singing, you would see that I was in clear violation of rule number 2: "Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can."

There are a few more directions John Wesley gives for singing together, and it seems like there's a little something in these directions for everybody. If you don't like a song, take it up as your cross to bear and sing it anyway. Even if you think you can't sing, join the choir and you'll find it to be a blessing. Sing modestly. Sing lustily. Sing spiritually. In short, use that voice, the good Lord gave you, and sing.

Singing and making melody in the heart, is the way to give thanks to God in love. But what happens when our situation and circumstance is full of discord? Life is hard, friends! And when the scripture says to give: "thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything," it is difficult to wrap our minds around that. Do we thank God for the cancer diagnosis? Do we thank God for the failed marriage? Do we thank God for financial ruin? Do we thank God for the automobile accident or for the things we call acts of God? Do we thank God for fire, flood, and earthquake? This idea that we are to give "thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything," it is unsettling and as the theologian, Ronald Goetz, puts it, we find it "touching the most sensitive nerve of our Christian experience." —(Christian Century, July 1, 1997)

When the world is against us, how is it that we can be assured that God is not against us too?

It is easy to be thankful when life is easy, but more difficult to be thankful when life is hard.

This past week the world mourned the passing of the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. Her singing began in the church choir where her father was a pastor and that firm foundation, empowered her to sing the anthems of our lives. As the Queen of Soul, she sang in a genre called rhythm and blues—R&B. And she is known to say that she sang to "the realists," to the people who say to life, "it is what it is." But because of her faith, she gave people hope against hope. She spelled out "Respect" for the disrespected and cautioned us to "Think" about the way we treat each other.

With her voice, she elevated the depths of despair into a call for action for the social movements of our age. With her life as a witness and our scripture as a guide, we say with confidence that the very act of singing is a reorientation to the situations and circumstances of life, and ultimately a reorientation toward God.

In every moment of every day we have the opportunity to make the decision to give thanks to God in love as a response to God's great love for us, even through life's trials and heavy burdens.

What happens **to** us is not nearly as important as what God does **in** us and **through** us when we are open to God's love.

No matter our situation or circumstances—whether we evaluate what happens in our lives as good or bad, we can always turn to God and call God good. Goodness and love are qualities of God's character we can continue to praise and to be thankful that God is love.

You have heard it said, "Love is love is love," But I say to you, "God is love," and the one does not negate the other. Praise God! That is the power and the crux of the ministry of reconciliation. We can hold both of these ideas as true, because the story of God's love is the overarching metanarrative of the entire gospel.

An attitude of gratitude in all times and for everything is a mark of spiritual maturity as is prayer without ceasing. We might even gauge our spiritual maturity and our attitude of gratitude by the way we face each day--

"The moment I wake up
Before I put on my makeup
I say a little prayer for you."

Gratitude in all things.

It seems so simple, but giving thanks to God for everything isn't always easy, and it's not automatic. It's something we learn to do through practice. Giving thanks to God for everything isn't something to mark off your daily checklist as complete, and it isn't just a prayer to please God. Giving thanks for all things is a gamechanger—it's a way of being—it's a way of receiving the world with an entirely different mindset and with an open heart.

I wonder in what ways we will each carry the harmony of our hearts into the world this week. Does it mean you might hum or sing when you are alone with God? Might you invite a friend or a family member to sing along with you? Might you pray about joining the church choir? How might you use that voice, the good Lord gave you, and sing?

Take care with the way you live by giving thanks to God, the Father of love, at all times and for every thing in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.