

Sermon Series: One Thousand Gifts (Week 1) October 25, 2015

Delight yourselves in God, yes, find your joy in God at all times. Have a reputation for gentleness, and never forget the nearness of your Lord. Don't worry over anything whatever; tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer, and the peace of God which transcends human understanding, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus. Here is a last piece of advice. If you believe in goodness and if you value the approval of God, fix your minds on the things which are holy and right and pure and beautiful and good. Model your conduct on what you have learned from me [Paul,] on what I have told you and shown you, and you will find the God of peace will be with you. It has been a great joy to me that after all this time you have shown such interest in my welfare. I don't mean that you had forgotten me, but up till now you had no opportunity of expressing your concern. Nor do I mean that I have been in actual need, for I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances may be. I know now how to live when things are difficult and I know how to live when things are prosperous. In general and in particular I have learned the secret of facing either poverty or plenty. I am ready for anything through the strength of the One who lives in me. Philippians 4:4-13 JB Phillips translation

This month I'm preaching a sermon series using Ann Voskamp's book, *One Thousand Gifts*, which I've read three times. Ann's book echoes the Apostle Paul's advice to the young churches: "Rejoice in the Lord, always" and "In everything give thanks." I've read the book three times because it's so challenged me; I've said to this little book what Jacob said to the angel whom he wrestled with all night long: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

Rejoicing in all things, and giving thanks in all things, is contrary to my nature. Perhaps if I'd been raised as a VonTrapp child (remember them from *The Sound of Music*?) I'd have more of a sunny disposition, be more apt to break into song even if enemies were hunting for me. But I was raised by my parents – good, Christian people - both of whom tended to be anxious, apprehensive, and especially sensitive to anything needed worrying about. (They both had ulcers.) All of my life I've associated God with feeling good, happy, and safe... and I've struggled to see God in sadness, in heartbreak, in loneliness, or conflict. I think the metaphor of wrestling till daybreak in order to receive a blessing, is older than this book [hold up *One Thousand Blessings*.] I've been in a lifelong wrestling-match to find God, to know God's presence - in darkness, in loneliness, in grief; in times when the world doesn't feel right.

Paul wrote this letter to the early churches who were struggling from within: learning to love each other as they'd experienced Christ's love; forgiving their enemies; serving others with humility and patience; living together as Christ's Body; sharing meals and prayers and needed resources with each other. And they were struggling from without: they were viewed with suspicion; persecuted; seen as dissident; disloyal to the ruling class, to the predominant religion; and they put loyalty to Christ even above the government. Likewise, Paul's life was hard and full of suffering. From prison he wrote letters to the churches, encouraging, advising, and correcting them. Paul had given up everything to follow Christ - he was beaten, rejected, threatened, and

imprisoned - and yet wrote to his fellow-sufferers about practicing joy and thanksgiving in all circumstances.

I love this quote from D. T. Niles, a 20th century Ceylonese pastor and president of the Ceylon Methodist Church. He said, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." That quote doesn't need to be explained or reframed, but let's connect it to Paul: suffering, and writing to the churches, who were suffering persecution and growing pains to become the Body of Christ. Paul wrote to them about practicing joy and thanksgiving. We speak most persuasively and powerfully about what we have experienced. Paul experienced suffering and hardship, and he wrote to his fellow-Christians about practicing joy and thanksgiving in all circumstances.

The first time I read *One Thousand Gifts* I argued with it, and discounted (some of) it. Ann Voskamp is a Calvinist, and I am not. She believes everything that happens (as John Calvin believed) comes from the hand of God. I do not. Everything in me argues against a God who causes heartbreak and tragedy as a lesson, or for our good. I *do* believe that God can use everything for a lesson and for our good... if we are able to see it, and receive it.

What I love about this book is that Ann began a simple task, a challenge that was given to her, to make a list of 1,000 things that she was thankful for... 1,000 gifts. She began to make the list and to be aware (her heart and her eyes were opened) to the amazing gifts she saw every day, every hour, every moment. Mindfulness and gratitude changed her. She experienced life and faith from a different perspective: not from want, from fear, from emptiness, from despair, from apathy... from all the ways our humanness shields and defends us from the suffering and hardship of life... but from thanksgiving. I loved knowing this. And I still struggled with the book, and with her theology.

The third time I read the book (still locked in a wrestling-match: "I will not let you go until you bless me!") I made a real effort to put my own defensiveness down and just be with the book, just share in this author's experience of looking for, and practicing, joy and thanksgiving in all circumstances.

I am so grateful that my parents brought me up in the church (it's one of the most important gifts we can give our children) but I want a different kind of faith than my parents practiced. I want a faith that can be experienced as peace, as confidence, as joy, as thanksgiving, even in the midst of change, of suffering, and the fragility of life. I think that's why I wrestled with *One Thousand Gifts*. I want more than my growing-up faith taught me. I want joy. I want thanksgiving. I want to see Jesus... in all circumstances. And I've come to understand two things in reading and wrestling with and listening to the Holy Spirit, though this book, *One Thousand Gifts*. One is that practicing thanksgiving is way to bridge theology (thinking about God; what you and I know about God) and practice (actually becoming more Christlike.) Practicing thanksgiving and joy (which are interlinked) requires that we live in the moment, that we see (and count) the blessings at hand. There are too many blessings to count... and when I practice thanksgiving I can pray with the psalmist who said, "My cup runneth over." When I practice thanksgiving, and look for blessings, and count joy, I think less about God and instead I notice God more. Thanksgiving is a way to bridge theology and practice.

I don't like theological clichés. They're thrown around like magic beans, that when planted in the right soil can grow us into spiritual giants. "WWJD?" is one of them. "Too blessed to be stressed" is another. "God doesn't give you more than you can handle" is another. I'm skeptical about anything that promises a miracle cure for spiritual and sin-sickness. My belief, and my experience, about spiritual transformation is that it is excruciatingly slow growth... invisible to the naked eye... and that's why so many of us give up on becoming more Christlike, because His work in us is almost imperceptible. I believe in it, however. I believe that Christ's love and presence is changing and transforming us. I'm experiencing for myself that noticing and counting joy, blessings, gifts, is changing my vision, my theology, and my understanding of who I am.

The second conviction I'm coming to is what I think Paul meant about rejoicing and being thankful in everything. The challenge here is to find God, in order to thank God, for being with us, for being the Presence of love and hope and grace, in all circumstances. And the real work is silencing fear, apprehension, and previous life-experience in order to be mindful and open... in order to seek and find God... in order to be grateful... to thank God for God's Presence... with us in all circumstances. It's a chain of events that leads to joy and thanksgiving: Silence. Looking. Openness. Gratitude. Joy.

We've all received a notebook today to begin the challenge of keeping a list of 1,000 blessings. Ann Voskamp writes about the notebook on her kitchen counter, and the one in her purse... and even scraps of paper where she's listing... Joy. Thanksgiving. Blessings. 1,000 Gifts.

When I was a child I had a hard time going to sleep at night. So my mother would give me a nightly "happy thought" which was the verbal equivalent of a nightlight, I think. I would go to bed with that happy thought to keep at bay my fears and chase away the monsters under the bed. Decades later I realize that the Apostle Paul also gave the church advice on how to keep fears at bay, how to keep from focusing on the enemies within and around us. This is the New Revised Standard Version of Philippians 4, verse 8: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." And... he adds "the peace of God will be with you."

It was not by willpower, nor by positive thinking, that Paul could find - not just contentment but joy! - in all circumstances. It was through his relationship, his experiences with, Jesus Christ.

For the next four weeks please join me as we strengthen our spiritual muscles, through the practice of thanksgiving. Start your list of 1,000 blessings today. (There is no joy, no blessing, no gift, too small or insignificant to list.) Next Sunday on our blessing-tree we'll write some of our gifts on paper leaves and hang them on the tree.

Now as we prepare for our time of prayer, let's prayerfully say the first sentence of Paul's letter to the churches. It's found on page 2, and begins with the word "Delight." "Delight yourselves in God, yes, find your joy in God at all times." Amen.

