

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us - set us right with God, make us fit for God - we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus Christ. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that God has already thrown open God's door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand - out in the wide open paces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectance such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary - we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit. Romans 5: 1-5 *The Message*

My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. James 1:2-5 *Common English Bible*

This morning I'd like to share a letter written to the United Methodist Churches in our Conference from Bishop Warner Brown.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

*[Jesus said] Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John 14:27)*

My heart was troubled yesterday as I watched the images coming out of Paris following simultaneous terror attacks taking place across that city. As of this writing, 129 people have been confirmed dead. My prayers are with the victims, and families, that have been devastated by these senseless acts of violence. As several world leaders have stated, this is an attack on all humanity.

Let us be in prayer for Paris and the people of France. These events have impacted them in the way September 11, 2001, grieved the US. Also, please pray for communities around our world that will not make the news, but cringe under the threat of violence. May the Holy Spirit guide us in ways that will break this cycle of violence.

As one news cycle ends its coverage of a violent act, it seems another emerges each week. Last night in our Sacramento community, a 16-year-old high school football player was killed, and another one injured, before a game near the school's campus. A

few weeks ago violent stabbings took place on the campus of UC Merced. Our Wesley Club campus ministry has been active in the aftermath of that tragedy. On a weekly basis, we see images of acts of violence in the US and around the globe.

Once again, the forces of evil have tried to dominate; but, as disciples of Jesus, we must make our witness that the darkness will not overcome our light. As we approach the Advent season ushering in the birth of the Prince of Peace, be vigilant in our communities and resist the systems and structures that lead to acts of violence.

*[As Jesus said] These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)*

Grace and Peace,  
Warner H. Brown, Jr.  
Resident Bishop

At the end of his letter Bishop Brown included a link to ideas of how to keep faith when it seems that there is no peace... anywhere... and the world is overcome by darkness. These ideas include to look for some good news; read the Good News (the bible); serve someone; get more deeply connected with your church family; pray; get some exercise; see the beauty around you; and be thankful for what you have.

I am heartsick over the terrorist attacks in Paris, the double-suicide bombing in Beirut, the staggering number of immigrants risking their lives to leave war-torn countries, and the increasing violence here at home. I find it hard to not feel discouraged and hopeless about the state of the world. I needed to read Bishop Brown's letter and be challenged to remember that the light of God is present, even in it seems the darkness has overcome it.

Three weeks ago I began a challenge for our congregation to keep lists 1,000 things we are thankful for. This has been an amazing experience... to do, and to talk about with others. The woman who cuts my hair is starting a list of what she's thankful

for. We had a conversation about whether or not God causes all things to happen, and if it's possible to be thankful for all circumstances. In every group I've met with in the church we've been sharing what we're thankful for. I've had conversations with people about how gratitude can change our body chemistry (just as anger and fear do) and my own list of thanks-giving continues to grow as I notice and record God's good gifts. I've had some deeper theological conversations with people about being thankful... in the midst of pain and heartbreak. Many of us are prayerfully examining what it means to [as Paul and James both wrote to the churches] be thankful always. What a challenge it is to be thankful always! I find it to be a chore, a discipline, like flossing my teeth or... writing a sermon. I've discovered how often I've equated my own happiness with thanksgiving; how often I wait to receive something (happiness) to then express thankfulness. I've discovered how much of my prayer life is telling God what God needs to notice, to do, to fix... and how much less it is about telling God how thankful I am, how full of thanks-giving I am. Noticing and listing 1,000 gifts is changing me.

Paul and James wrote to the young churches, babes in faith, encouraging, advising, and admonishing them. To their credit neither of these spiritual teachers and elders ever wrote to their fellow Christians, "For God's sake, grow up!" But both of their letters today insist that spiritual maturity is needed in order for us to be able to be thankful at all times. Neither of them write about the pursuit of happiness [that's a different document] instead they write about seeing God in all things as a way to find thanksgiving... and its offshoot, grace... and its outcome, joy. Ann Voskamp, the author of *One Thousand Gifts*, writes about joy, "I want me some of that." I do too. I want to

experience joy and grace and thanksgiving especially in the wreckage of local and world news of terrorism and desperate human need.

Week after week I preach about faith, about hope, about living as authentic followers of Jesus Christ... and I know that I'm preaching "to the Choir." The Urban Dictionary defines "preaching to the Choir" as "trying to make believers out of people who already believe, or convince people who are already convinced." But as believers, why don't we have more joy? As those convinced of the grace of God, why don't we offer more grace, to others, and to ourselves? I think it's because we don't practice the root-word of joy and grace: eucharisteo, thanksgiving. It's our human tendency to be more focused on the pursuit of happiness than the practice of thanksgiving. Looking for happiness seems so much easier than the discipline of noticing and expressing thanksgiving for all God's gifts.

On the first week of this sermon-series on *One Thousand Gifts*, I said that I want a faith that will stand up in times of worry and want, about a faith that is more than an intellectual understanding of theological concepts. I want a life-sustaining relationship with Jesus Christ. I want more than my childhood faith gave me. Paul and James tell us how to develop mature faith: it is to be thankful. It is to see God's guiding and sustaining and correcting hand in times of hardship, in fear and sorrow and loss, even when it seems that the darkness (in the world and inside us all) has overcome the light of God.

Paul writes that for the mature Christian, our hope is not in circumstances but in being reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. That way our peace - our deep, down peace in the goodness and the presence of God - can't be disturbed by circumstances. I love Eugene Peterson's interpretation on reconciliation: "We throw open our doors to

God and discover at the same moment that God has already thrown open God's door to us." Paul writes in other letters that there is nothing in all creation (so whatever happens we can practice thanksgiving for this!) that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God. Really, that's a lifetime of thanks-giving right there: nothing can come between you and God's love for you. Thank You God! Say it with me: Thank You God!

I need to retrace my steps here and talk about being thankful in all things. I don't believe that God causes all things (this isn't Eden, it's a fallen world; and maybe more perilous is that we humans have been given free will) so being thankful in all things is different than being thankful for all things. It's just one word, "in" instead of "for"... but it's important to me to not make God an arbitrary or manipulative God who causes heartbreak and suffering with the intent that someone, somewhere, will learn a good lesson. God allows life, and all creation, to run its course. What we can celebrate, where there is cause for thanks-giving, is that God is with us: in life, and in death, and in all the space in-between. And God can teach us, and bring healing, and good to us, in all situations.

James is probably the oldest book in the New Testament, written to Jewish Christians dispersed outside Palestine because of persecution. He wrote to the churches about being tested by life circumstances as cause for joy, because in hardship our mettle - our courage, fortitude, and faith - is tested. James, and other Christians persecuted for their faith, understood that spiritual maturity was forged - shaped and strengthened - in suffering. He understood himself to be sustained, even in suffering, by the love and presence of the Risen Christ, and he saw joy, again, rather than happiness, in a sustaining relationship with Christ. In the peace and security of God's

love (even in the midst of persecution) James learned to give thanks... in all things. Can I thank God in all circumstances? No, not yet. But my list of 1,000 gifts is teaching me to look for, to notice, and to be amazed, and thank God for all of God's gifts.

This morning, even as we grieve those places in the world that are overcome with fear and grief, we still celebrate. We give thanks to God. This morning I am especially thankful for ten new members of our congregation. I love the words in the celebration liturgy, especially on page 4, where we are asked: "Will you recognize that the presence and participation [of our newest members] will change the shape of the body [of Christ] and help it grow in new ways?" Thank You, God! that You are growing us, and shaping us into maturing Christians, into the image of Your firstborn, Jesus Christ. And like James and Paul - Lord, may we learn to give thanks in all things. Amen.

And now I invite our newest members to join me on the chancel. Please bring your bulletin, and everyone, please turn to page 3 in your bulletin, as we thank God together for these ten new members.