Living a Life of Gratitude, week 2
I Thess. 5:16-18, James 1:2-5
When Gratitude is hard.

Last week we began a series on living a life of gratitude. We started by looking at the advantages of gratitude – it's good for our physical and mental health, and it's a good spiritual discipline. We also looked at the evolving history of gratitude and noted that gratitude is complicated – often we experience gratitude with other emotions. Finally, we talked about how God is a lavish gift giver – God gives us amazing gifts expecting nothing in response.

This morning, we turn our attention to the reality that sometimes gratitude is difficult. Last week I heard a story about an old country preacher who always expressed gratitude to God when he opened the worship service. One morning the area had experienced a ferocious blizzard and it was bitterly cold. The faithful who had made it to church were curious to see what the preacher would say that morning. "God," he opened his

prayer, “We thank you this morning that all the days aren’t this bad.”

It’s an endearing story, and it’s also a great lead in to our topic this morning. Is it really possible, as James tells us, to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials? Does God really expect us to give thanks in all things – when we’ve lost a loved one, when everything we own is wiped out in a hurricane or a fire, when we come home from serving our country with disabling moral injuries, when despite our best efforts there are deep rifts in our relationships, in our country and in our world? (PAUSE)

How we answer these questions depends on how we view God and how we view suffering. As humans, we have always struggled with why we suffer, and in Scripture we see how our thinking about it changed over time. In many of the earlier books in the Old Testament, writers expressed the view that if you were suffering, you must have done something wrong -- it was a punishment. If you were sick or experienced misfortune, you must have committed some sin that made you worthy of

punishment. Many people still hold to this today – and to its counterpoint – that if we are successful we must be living right and therefore God is blessing us.

This view is called into question in the book of Job, where we see a righteous man suffer the loss of his health, his wealth, and his family. In his ministry Jesus continues to challenge this view. In the Gospel of John, Jesus sees a man who has been blind since birth. His disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned ... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

The reality is, we live in a fallen world where bad things happen. (PAUSE) To all of us. (PAUSE) Things don’t work out the way we hoped or planned.

This is what was happening for the believers in the church at Thessalonica. You see, all of the original believers expected Christ to return very soon – certainly within their lifetimes. This is likely one of the reasons that Paul didn’t work to address the suffering and societal issues of his day such as slavery and patriarchy. Jesus

was returning so soon that it was more important in their eyes to get the word about Jesus to as many people as possible. (PAUSE) But then Jesus didn't return, and they were left waiting. (PAUSE) And we're still waiting to today. (PAUSE) And while everyone is waiting, suffering continues.

For the early church, suffering meant continuing to live under the oppression of Rome and the poverty and lack of basic human rights that entailed. The early believers experienced persecution and even death for their faith. (PAUSE)

It is into this context that Paul writes this first letter to the believers at Thessalonica. For the first time that we know of, Paul is helping the church to figure out how to live in what was turning out to be a longer in-between time – the time between the resurrection and when Christ returns.

So, while we continue to wait, how do we live the joyful, thankful life that Christ called us to when there is so much suffering? One scholar noted the key difference of giving thanks IN all things versus being thankful FOR

all things. Yes, we will face trials and suffering, serious ones, James agrees, but we can face them thankful that we have the resources of the presence of God, of prayer, and of a supportive community around us. You see, the book of James was written to the community as whole, not to individual believers – a good reminder that we rejoice and give thanks together in community, that we work through our sufferings together. It is also important to remember, as William Braserd reminds us, that it is God's faithfulness to us not our human efforts that make such a life possible.

But let's be clear, this is not a blind or naïve faith that denies or ignores the suffering and pain we feel. Remember, gratitude is complicated. We often experience it along with other emotions. (PAUSE)

In his book, The Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen likens our lives to the sacrament of communion. He asserts that as beloved children of God we are all taken – or chosen by God. God loves us, desires us, and wants to live in relationship with us.

Next, we are blessed. We are blessed by God and we are to bless each other. We all need these words of affirmation.

Then, Nouwen reminds us, as the bread is broken in communion, we are all broken in unique ways. He asserts that we must claim our own brokenness just as we each have to claim our own chosenness and our own blessedness.

How do we respond to this brokenness and suffering? Nouwen asks. By leaning into it and even befriending it, instead of trying to avoid it, ignore it or deny it. We almost always see suffering as an unwelcome intrusion into our lives, something that shouldn't be there. It often seems impossible to see anything positive in it. But, Nouwen argues, the first step toward healing is to step toward the pain, not away from it[i]. Human suffering need not be an obstacle to joy and peace, he writes. Instead it can become the means to joy and peace.

Our first steps of leaning into the pain may be baby steps, and that is okay. But we should not, in fact we cannot lean in to pain and suffering alone, we need others

standing in it with us to remind us and assure us that there is peace beyond the anguish, life beyond death, and love beyond fear.[ii]

The other thing we need to do with our suffering and brokenness is to move it out from under the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing. Nouwen argues that our pain and brokenness is so hard to face because we believe that it means we live under the curse – in other words we experience our pain as a confirmation of our negative feelings about ourselves. When we lose a family member, when we fail at something important, when war breaks out or we are victims of a natural disaster we tend to ask Why? Why me? Why now? (PAUSE) We are easily seduced into connecting the events over which we have not control with our own unworthiness.

Nouwen argues that the great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God is to do the hard work of moving our suffering and brokenness from the shadow of the curse into the light of the blessing. Now, let me be clear here. God does NOT cause our suffering – God

desires that we have abundant life. But God created us with free will and that means that we live in a fallen world – that we have the capacity to do good and evil, that eventually we will all experience suffering of some kind. But if we bring these experiences under the light of the blessing, we allow God to walk with us and to work in us, to help us to heal and grow through the pain.

Nouwen is quick to point out that leaning into our pain and bringing it under the blessing will not necessarily make our pain less painful, and our pain may never vanish completely. Ask someone who has lost a spouse or a child, the pain may lessen over time, but we will always carry it. We can only learn to let God and others help us carry it and be willing to learn and grown with it and through it.

So, Nouwen asserts, we are chosen, we are blessed, we are broken, and then finally we are given – we live our lives in service to others. Our brokenness can open up a deeper way of sharing our lives and offering each other hope. This is why support systems like grief groups, and 12 step programs like AA and NA are so

successful – when we give ourselves to each other, when we are vulnerable and share our pain with one another, we heal and help others heal as well.

As we prepare to close today, I want to note that the authors I have been drawing on for this series both have their own experiences with deep suffering. Diana Butler Bass was abused by an uncle. Like Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen experienced periods of deep depression, and he spent the final years of his ministry serving in a community of profoundly handicapped adults. They have known deep suffering. When these two authors encourage us to find joy and thanksgiving in all things, they speak from experience, from leaning in to their pain AND into God's ever-presence and unfailing love.

My prayer this morning is that we may do the same – leaning into the hard things together, and learning to be thankful in them as we work our way through them. May it be so with the help of God and with each other. And all God's people said, "Amen."

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[i] Henri Nouwen, The Life of the Beloved pp 75-76
[ii] Ibid., 77.