

How Can We Thank God Enough?

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you
in return for all the joy that we feel before our God
because of you?

Night and day we pray most earnestly
that we may see you face to face
and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself
and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love
for one another and for all,
just as we abound in love for you.

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 the saints.

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I.

Usually when I sit down to write a sermon the most pressing question is “Where do we begin?” This week, though, is strangely different as I have been pondering, “Where does all of this end up?”

Tuesday evening I had the great pleasure of dining with Chris Remick at 11 West. Chris has been a real gift to me, and to our church, in his willingness to fill the pulpit for the lion’s share of the Sundays I have been on vacation for the past three years or so. Given the pulpit he is filling, the frequency with which he has done so, and the congregation to which he has preached, this has been no small feat or light lift.

Beyond getting to know each other better, the dinner was meant to be an effort to thank him for giving me the opportunity to occasionally step back from the church, clear my head, and to rest and rejuvenate. Chris has given me a life these past years and I’m profoundly grateful to him. Which is why when we sat down at the table and learned the dinner special was prime rib, I said, “Chris, you should get the prime rib; I’m buying and you’ve certainly earned it.”

II.

The other reason we were meeting is that Chris shared with me he is finding it harder and harder to come up with sermons ideas. “Welcome to my world,” I told him. So, of course, I let him off the hook, telling him I certainly understood and that he can take a step back or, at the very least, greatly reduce his load.

Now, Chris is a smart cookie. When he preached here last week he had the opportunity to meet Leia and immediately recognized the opportunity she presents to add another person to the rotation. I told him it *just* so happens I will be having lunch with Leia on Tuesday, and there is *some* chance the topic may come up (sssh, it’s a surprise). However, hoping to offer some

encouragement, what I also said to Chris by way of suggestion is that in my own preaching I find it helpful to get smaller and smaller. In the spirit of comedian Steve Martin, then, "[Let's get small.](#)" Theologically speaking, that is.

III.

I am not sure if you had the chance to see one of the messages which has been running on the sign all this week, or saw the image of it in the December newsletter, but it is a quote from the 14th century German priest, philosopher, theologian, and mystic Meister Eckart: "If the only prayer you ever say in your *entire* life is 'thank you,' it will be enough."

While this is certainly an appropriate message to display out in front of our church during the week of Thanksgiving, it does beg an important question to those of us who possess a serious intent about our faith, and are actually endeavoring to live our lives according to that faith. Namely, *is it enough?!?* Thankfulness, I mean.

IV.

If you had asked me that question when I was young, or while I was in seminary, or as I began in parish ministry, or during the first 20 years or so of my tenure here in Canton, I am not so sure I could have answered that question in the affirmative. I don't know about you, but for most of my life, faith felt *epic*. Like some huge gordian knot which the believer has to toil to untangle, or some enormous theological onion which requires us to peel back layer after layer of meaning so as to finally reveal its meaning and mysteries.

We also have the tendency to understand our faith as a burden, as the proverbial cross to bear. There is the practice of repentance, or change making, the need for spiritual discipline, and the onus of living an ethical life in a world which seems to care increasingly less about right and wrong. Fortunately for those of us who have abided such a laborious faith, time tells a different tale.

V.

While it is ever the case that faith requires a concerted effort, these days I find it is less about working harder more about working smarter. One way to accomplish this is to get small. To see faith *less* as about all that *we* must do

and *more* about allowing God to do *through* us, *to* us and, yes, *for* us. Which is the perfect message for today as we begin our anticipation of the arrival, or the advent, of God coming into our lives at Christmas.

It also turns out that Christmas is the perfect metaphor for working smarter in our faith. For the majority of people in our society Christmas is almost wholly about preparation, with only a wee bit of anticipation thrown in. From the shopping to the travel, to the meal planning, to the baking and the wrapping and the decorating, Christmas is a *ton* of hard work all done with the small expectation of a few moments on a silent and holy night to actually *feel* the spark of the spirit of Christmas within us and, hopefully, cause it to stir in those we love.

VI.

Often, though, the spark is felt in spite of the preparation, not because of it. It does not require a fancy feast, a new iPhone, that toy which is all the rage this year, or an 85 inch TV (like the one in Selleck Room). There was a time when all that was required was so very little; an orange, a few nuts, and a candy cane would suffice. The wonder of Christmas isn't to be found in the must-have-more of materialism, but in the magic and meaning of those small mystical moments when we pause our lives in order that we might say, or pray, "Thank you."

It is no accident that one of the first and most important things we teach kids are the *magic words*: "Please" and "Thank You." For Meister Eckhart, the words "Thank You" are more than just magical, they are *mystical* words. They are the *means* by which we open ourselves up to God, invite God into our hearts, and make room for God in our lives; which is when all the joy can begin to happen. Or, more correctly, we tune into the joy which is already happening all around us.

VII.

For Eckhart, thankfulness is not just the gateway to the life of faith, it is the lofty pinnacle to the high art of spiritual practice. Thankfulness is where we begin our faith. It is the "See Spot Run" primer for the spiritual journey. At the same time, though, thankfulness is also where our faith ends up. It is the Post-doctoral research position achieved after years of study and experimentation which yields a mastery in the field.

While this is often experienced linearly across the span of one's life as one matures spiritually, paradoxically these can actually begin to happen in the very same mystical Alpha and Omega moment. All that is required is a bit of practice, and a willingness to allow ourselves to get small...theologically by not getting hung up on all the big questions like the limits of redemption, or bogged down by esoterica like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. We just need to be thankful enough.

VIII.

Which is harder than we might think. In our scripture reading for today from the first letter to the Thessalonians, one of the earliest Epistles, we find Paul posing a not insignificant question: "How can we thank God Enough?" The joy Paul feels for this congregation is so much, that he fears his thankfulness will never fully suffice. Yes, there are other issues, big issues, at work in that congregation, but Paul leads with the small stuff, the simple stuff, like joy and thankfulness.

Time and again in the Bible we find humans stumbling over the solution to get to the problem. One might argue that this is the very nature of sin: to ignore the bounty and the blessings of the Garden in which God has given us to live in favor of some knowledge or understanding we mistakenly believe we must first possess before we can receive the joy which already abounds in our lives. We put the cart before the horse such that neither can take us anywhere; especially those places we could ever imagine we might be able to go if we would only be thankful enough.

IX.

I would like to end today with a story. Friday evening I had a very strange and most surprising experience. That morning I was at the church helping Jim Durham work on the boiler. Each year at the start of heating season it is inevitably that air needs to get bled from some of the lines so water can flow and can heat be delivered. After a couple of hours of this we had every zone in the church working except for the foyer, which required a replacement part we did not have. Before I left, I texted Patience and told her the good news.

Then, at 5 p.m. I got a text from Patience saying, "Not what you want to hear but having trouble with heat in Fellowship Hall, I set it to come on at 1

p.m. but it's only up to 62 degrees in here." Normally, I would have dealt with it later but this was the night of the Holiday of Lights and there would soon be hundreds of kids and families seeking to warm themselves after standing in line in the cold for too long in order to sit on Santa's lap.

X.

So, I changed out of my cozy clothes, got into my work clothes, grabbed a flashlight and channel lock pliers, and drove the 1/2 hour into town. Though I had watched and helped Jim do it countless times, I had never bled a line by myself. Which, I will tell you, was a little nerve-wracking to contemplate on the drive in given one is dealing with extremely hot water, and it is quite easy to do far more harm than good (not only to the heating system, but to oneself). Thankfully, Jim is a good and patient teacher and I soon had heat restored to Fellowship Hall.

Here, though, is where it got strange. I was walking back and forth through the foyer to see if heat was reaching all the zones in the church. As I did so, I passed by *scores* of people coming into and out of the church and not a one of them knew who I was. Not that they necessarily *should* have, but it was a very odd feeling to have a church full of people who had no idea about the church.

XI.

The experience reminded me that all the dots don't need to be connected all the time. Our scriptural and theological understanding need not be expansive, comprehensive, or complete. All we really need to do, certainly for starters, is to be thankful enough. Like being thankful for a warm building, and cookies and hot chocolate for one's kids and grandkids.

How, why and where such things come to be is in many ways beside the point. If we start with being thankful for the joy, as everyone I met on Friday night certainly was, everything else will follow. Start by getting small and the all the big will follow. Amen.