

ALWAYS THANKFUL

Psalm 98
Rev. Mary J. Scifres

Ephesians 5:18b-20
Community Church, Congregational

When I was in college, I worked part-time as a tutor in the Writing Lab. I loved helping people edit and improve their papers, and felt a great deal of fulfillment when they came back proudly displaying A's and B's to reward their hard work. But when I left that Writing Lab every afternoon, I seldom gave my students a second thought. It was my part-time job, and I had more important things to focus on: my own papers, practicing for my piano recitals, planning outings with my friends. I was too busy to think about my tutoring students! Contrast that with my Literature professor, who wrote entire dissertations in the margins of our papers, insisting on 4-5 drafts before he would accept a final paper from anyone in the class. When papers weren't coming along the way he wanted, he would moan to us that he'd lain awake the night before trying to figure out how to explain the assignment more clearly or how to inspire us to delve more deeply into the story or poem we were studying. We and our writing seemed to always be on his mind. He was obsessed with teaching literary analysis to us.

My friend Arlyth is this way about praise and thanksgiving. Whereas most people think about giving thanks on Thanksgiving day in November or while praying before a meal, Arlyth seems to think about giving thanks all the times. Like my lit professor was obsessed with writing, Arlyth is obsessed with thanksgiving and praise. Every time she speaks, she begins by thanking God for something. Every note she writes includes a sentence of praise for both God and the person she's writing. When she listens to an anthem or a sermon, I can see pure gratitude shining in her eyes, regardless of the quality or style of that moment in worship. Arlyth is my role model for the person who understands this morning's passage from Ephesians 5.

*Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Ephesians 5:18b-20)*

Be filled with the Spirit.... Giving thanks to God at all times and for everything. That's what Arlyth does. It's no wonder she only has good things to say about others and always seems at peace with everyone in her family and her church. Arlyth is so busy giving thanks that she doesn't have time for anything less than the best. Praise is a full-time, round-the-clock, all-consuming attitude that flows through her very soul and emanates from every word she speaks and every expression on her face. I want to be like Arlyth! I want to be that person who gives thanks to God at all times in all places for everything. Every thing! All the time. No matter what.

But how to get there in a culture that seems to revel in criticism and complaint? That's the challenge. So ever since I met Arlyth and began admiring her constant attitude of praise, I've been taking it a step at a time, and that would be my advice to you. Find the ways and times you can begin to give thanks. Begin with part-time praise, so you can work it into a full-time job. Give thanks before every meal, or add a gratitude list to your evening prayers. Pause to give thanks when a special blessing comes your way. When criticism or complaint creeps in, say "hello" and "goodbye" to that moment and welcome gratitude by thinking of something good in your life. Praise God for the blessings you recognize, or take it the next level as one Native American tradition teaches and *Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way.*

Even though I pray every day and have done so for many years, I confess to you that I haven't always spend a lot of time in thanksgiving. On my good days, I would remember to include time for giving thanks for the many blessings of my life, but not every day. Then a few years ago, my mother began writing lists of things for which she is grateful. She even dedicated one year to saying thank you to strangers and clerks who had made her day a little better, often

sending a note to a store manager about the employees who had helped her out. Mom encouraged me to start listing my blessings, and so I have journal pages full of blessings and things for which I'm grateful. When I'm feeling depressed or grumpy, reading through one of those lists can turn everything around. So, now I've added gratitude lists to my morning prayer. It helps me get along better with my husband if I rise each morning thanking God for him. It helps me be patient with impatient drivers when I'm thankful for a working car and the physical ability to drive. On my best days, I'll exclaim a word of gratitude several times a day – for a particularly striking sunset, a special encounter with my husband or my son, or a note of encouragement that comes when I need it most.

But I want to be like Arlyth! Because praise isn't a part-time job, and I'm still just doing it part of the time. And when I quit doing it, I almost always lose touch with joy and start feeling worried or anxious or depressed or impatient or critical. Paul has it right: Give thanks to God all the time for everything. Arlyth has got it right: Praising God full-time, no matter what....

A few years ago, when my spouse B. J. began cancer treatment, he really captured my admiration with his focus on gratitude and praise in that troubling journey. I think I heard him say "I am so grateful" more often in those 6 months than in the entire 25 years we've been together. Another friend of mine was going through a cancer journey at the same time, and ended every one of his Facebook posts that year with the hashtag #sograteful. These two men gave thanks to God in the midst of cancer--praising God at all times and for everything: the good times and the bad, the good health and the cancer journey, the happy family and the troubled times, the fulfilling work and the frustrating days. These two men inspired me that year to take my gratitude game up a level - giving thanks to God at all times and for everything – definitely a

full-time, all-consuming attitude, not a part-time job. But that attitude creates an inner joy like nothing else.

Challenging as this shift in thinking may be, it's a shift that can transform our lives in powerful ways. But with that attitude comes joy, a joy that can unite even the most disjointed family or the most frustrated friends. I've seen the benefits of this attitude in the way Arlyth weathers life's storms and losses and griefs. She is not a young woman; she has lost her husband, had to move far away from her hometown, and struggles with the same aches and pains and sorrows that most humans encounter in our later years. But in her full-time, all-consuming attitude of gratefulness and praise, she has developed an inner peace that draws people to her. We are drawn to her kindness and wisdom; we are drawn to her spirit of love; we are drawn to the way she appreciates everyone and is patiently kind even to the people that make most of the rest of us impatient; we are drawn to her songs of thanksgiving and words of praise, for when she speaks it is like a Praise Psalm from heaven.

The Psalmist calls us to sing a new song, to make a joyful noise and break into joyous song. Pull out those instruments – let's make some noise! Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to put on Pharrell Williams *Happy* and make you start dancing and drumming, tempting as that sounds to me. But I am inviting you to begin with a song of praise. Let's take a moment to let music help us remember to praise God and give thanks, as we unify our voices in song.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING OR SONG OF PRAISE HERE

Can you feel the change when we give thanks? So, let's take it to the level of prayer. Instead of a formal prayer, I want you to just call out things for which we can praise God. Let's hear it. What are you thankful for? What are your words of praise this day. Come on, this is audience participation time.... (*Congregational input*)

Now, let's change it up a bit, face the real challenge of this passage of scripture, calling us to full-time praise. What are you worried about? Can you share some concern or trouble or worry and trust God and us enough to share it with gratitude? Let's try a couple.... (*More congregational input*)

I know that's more difficult, but I've seen counselors use Laughter Yoga in with terminally ill patients, and seen those patients' last days transformed by laughter in the face of deep sorrow and grief. Praise and thanksgiving aren't only for happy times. When we allow thanksgiving to become a full-time, all-consuming way of being, living, thinking, and acting, **we will be transformed**. Thankfulness can become a gift, strengthening us for times of trouble and enhancing times of celebration. With attitudes of full-time praise and gratitude, we can discover a joy and a peace that truly passes all understanding. And these, my friends, are gifts truly worthy of praise.

Prayer

Looking behind may we be filled with gratitude.

Looking forward, may we be filled with vision.

Looking upwards, may we be filled with strength.

Looking within, may we be discover peace.

We offer this prayer in the name of Christ Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying....

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed by the name.

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.