

Living A Life of T.H.A.N.K.S.G.I.V.I.N.G.

Thanksgiving 2009

Rev. Craig M. Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas

In the 5th chapter of Thessalonians, St. Paul says, “Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you.”

Be thankful in all circumstances. Be thankful in every way, every day. A life of thanksgiving.

That started me thinking. If Christians are to live a life of thanksgiving, I wonder if the word “THANKSGIVING” could be used as an acronym for the Christian life? What would each letter stand for? Although there are lots of possibilities, I’ve come up with my own list. I’ve included some sermon notes in the bulletin if you would like to follow along. So here we go.

T reminds us to **Turn From Sin**. I know... what a way to start, with the dreaded **S** word: SIN. Our Christian journey begins by taking an honest look at the way we live our lives. When John the Baptist was preparing people to meet Jesus Christ, he commanded them to “REPENT! TURN FROM SIN.”

Repentance is necessary because it is only when we are willing to change our ways and totally surrender our lives to Christ that we are fully prepared to follow him. Only when we confess our sins can forgiveness be offered. And without God’s forgiveness, there is no hope of peace or salvation.

Jesus himself says in Luke 24, “There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.” This is why, week after week, we begin worship by confessing our sins. It allows us to get rid of all the guilt and shame that our daily actions bring upon us. Confessing our sins and receiving God’s forgiveness gives us a new start, a second chance. Hearing those words, “I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins” allows us to clear our minds and hearts so that we can give our full attention to Jesus and to the things he desires to teach us. So the first step to living a life of thanksgiving is to “Turn From Sin.”

H reminds us to **Help Those In Need**. Jesus always had a special place in his heart for those who were in any kind of need. Jesus focused his time and energy on those who needed healing, on those who were hungry or naked, on those who felt unworthy or unloved, on those who had lost their way.

Right before Jesus ascends into heaven, the Gospel of John records Jesus asking Simon Peter, “Do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter responds. “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus answers back.

Jesus is revealing to us that our love for God is made known most clearly when we take care of his children who are in need. For those who have fallen on hard times, Jesus calls us to make an extra effort to support and encourage them. If we are constantly focused upon our own needs and desires and are not reaching out to love and serve others, then we are not living the life of thanksgiving that God intended for us.

A reminds us to **Avoid Judging Others**. This one always gets us. Yes, Jesus calls us to help those in need, but when we see the man at the street corner begging for money, we wonder if he is truly hungry or simply funding a drug or alcohol habit. We very quickly start playing judge.

Instead of admitting the shortcoming of our own lives, we compare ourselves to those who have lots of problems, thereby making ourselves look all the more saintly. Unfortunately, such a comparison makes us no more worthy or closer to God.

Jesus puts it in perspective when he says in Matthew 7, “The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.” Before we start worrying about that speck in our friend’s eye, Jesus says, we should concern ourselves with the log in our own.

This doesn’t mean we are to remain silent when we see people living in ways that are wrong in the Lord’s sight. Rather, this command forbids us from degrading people or pointing out their faults in a mean-spirited way. St. Paul encourages us to speak the truth in love. No matter what mess someone has gotten themselves into, we are to use love to help them get out. The way to show others the better way, Jesus says, is to model it in our own lives.

N reminds us to **Navigate Away From Temptations**. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Someone once joked that God doesn’t need to lead us into temptation because we can find it just fine all by ourselves.” This world is full of temptations which draw us away from this life of thanksgiving God desires for us.

All of us have things in our lives which tempt us to stray from the ways of Christ. A pastor noticed that one of his members was having difficulty staying awake during worship. When he asked her why she was always so tired, she confessed that she went out with her friends every Saturday night until 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning. Her pastor suggested that her Saturday night ritual might be hindering her relationship with God. And she fully agreed! That is what temptation is all about: knowing full well that something is causing us to stumble in our walk with God and yet we keep right on doing it.

Jesus teaches us not only to acknowledge the temptations in our life, but to *navigate* away from them. It's like a diabetic who thinks he can eat as many sweets as he wants. If his blood sugar goes too high, he'll simply give himself another insulin shot. I don't have to tell you that's a recipe for disaster.

The first chapter of James puts it this way: "Temptation comes from our selfish desires, which entice us and drag us away. We should focus then on whatever is good and perfect."

K reminds us to **keep the Sabbath**. This, of course, is the third commandment. So much rides on worship. Worship is the foundation of the Christian faith. To deprive ourselves of a weekly worship experience is to sever ourselves from the very lifeblood of Jesus.

For it is when the people of God gather together that Jesus himself becomes truly present among us: through the proclamation of the Word, through the waters of baptism, through the bread and wine of the crucified and risen Christ. To live a life of thanksgiving, we must always make the Sunday Sabbath a top priority in our lives. Worship is the sure-fire way to keep our faith alive and well.

S reminds us to **share your faith**. Jesus calls us to be bold in sharing the story of his love that has become so near and dear to our hearts. Unfortunately, the words "share your faith" makes Lutherans want to run in the other direction. And that's unfortunate. Sometimes I wonder if we have the wrong idea of what it means to share our faith.

Some denominations have an in-your-face approach. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" That's a powerful question, but it's not a *Lutheran* question. For Lutherans, it's not so much that we have accepted Christ, but that Christ has accepted us.

The 5th chapter of Romans reminds us that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Just because most Lutherans are not in-your-face kind of people doesn't mean that we don't have good news to share. If we are mindful of the conversations that we have on a daily basis, there are always moments to infuse God's grace and hope. Perhaps a co-worker has shared with you that she is dreading this holiday season because she will not be able to be with family. Such a comment opens the door for us to share how blest we feel to be a part of a church family who loves and cares for us, and who is mindful when we are going through rough times. Such comments allow us to extend invitations to people to come and experience the family of God.

G stands for **grow in faith through Bible Study**. God has spelled out – in great detail – how to experience a blessed life. God’s plan is called The Holy Bible. Although Lutherans are quick to agree that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, very few of us actually read God’s Word on a daily basis.

How can we live by the teachings of the Bible if we do not know what those teachings are? To neglect God’s Word is to throw away the roadmap that leads to abundant, everlasting life. The more time we spend in God’s Word, the stronger our faith in God will become. God will become a trusted companion as we make our journey of faith.

The letter **I** reminds us to **invest your gifts in God’s kingdom**. God has gifted each one of us with marvelous gifts. Not one of God’s children was left out. God has gifted every last one of us so that his church might be equipped to share Christ’s love and mercy with all the world.

Some are gifted in public speaking, so let them read the Scriptures and preach. Others are gifted as teachers, so let them commit to passing on the faith to the younger generations. For others, music simply pours out of them, so let them bless Christian assemblies with song. Still others find joy in visiting those who are sick, or perhaps doing behind-the-scenes labor. Whatever your gift, St. Paul declares, share it for the sake of the kingdom.

Share it, knowing full well that as you share the gift God has given you, you are giving honor and glory to God, the giver of all good gifts. As we share our gifts in daily life, we are fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives.

V is a humdinger: **View every need and uncertainty as a chance to trust God**. Bad things happen. I don’t have to tell you that. Often times when life seems to deal us the short end of the stick we start to question things. We might even start to question God’s goodness and wisdom.

Kerri and I experienced this first-hand. After 11 years of marriage, our dream of becoming parents was still unfulfilled. As we watched everyone else celebrating births and baptisms, we remained childless, our hearts heavy with grief and sadness.

We could have easily become bitter and self-absorbed. But instead we chose to continue to trust that God had a plan for our lives. In 2006, God’s plan was revealed as we were given the gift of Emma Grace.

God’s timetable never seems to be the same as the one we have carefully planned for ourselves. That’s where trust comes in. It takes lots of faith to pray, “Not my will, Lord, but your will be done.” For those who choose to not give up hope, Scripture

assures us marvelous things await us. In Romans, St. Paul writes, “We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God.” So keep believing. Keep trusting that even when things are rough, God is still in control. God has a plan for our lives.

The letter **I** reminds us to **inspire others through your words and deeds**. People should know that we are Christians simply by watching us in action. Living a life of thanksgiving not only means confessing our faith with our lips, but also living out our faith through our daily actions. Jesus once said, “Not everyone who calls me ‘Lord’ will be saved.” It’s a stark reminder that God desires us to be people who walk the talk. Faith is an action word. Our faith should inform the daily choices we make. Let us never forget that we, as God’s chosen people, have a different set of rules to live by than the rest of the world. Our lives just might be the only Bible some people read.

N reminds us **never cease to pray**. Prayer is simply having a conversation with God. God longs for us to check in with him everyday so that a close, deep relationship can develop. In prayer, we can share the joys and sorrows of our hearts, knowing that God both hears every word and cares deeply for us.

Let us never forget the power of prayer. Prayer changes things. It makes a real difference. People with a grave diagnosis unexpectedly turn the corner. Tumors start shrinking. Jobs are secured. Troubled hearts receive peace. Never underestimate the power of prayer. The saying, “Prayer changes things” is not just some cute cliché. It is a testament to the power of prayer, a gift that God has given to us to heal this broken world.

The last letter, **G**, reminds us to **give back to God**. Realizing that God has sacrificed everything for us – even his very own Son – we should be motivated to give back to God. Not out of duty, but out of gratitude. How odd it is that we set aside one day a year and call it “thanksgiving.” For Christians, it is not enough for us to have only one day of “Thanksgiving.” Our entire lives should be ones of Thanksgiving.

Out of gratitude for all God has done for us, we should be motivated to offer our time, talents, and treasures for the sake of Christ’s church. Giving back to God ultimately is a trust issue. When God promises to watch over us and to provide for our every need, can that promise be trusted? If our hearts can answer yes, then we can freely and generously offer our lives to God, without looking back, believing that in God’s gracious kingdom, there is plenty for all.

So there you have it - twelve ways to experience a life of thanksgiving. I encourage you to hang those sermon notes in a prominent place. Glance at it every once in a while to see how well you are doing living out the Christian faith. Or better yet, allow it to remind you of how blest you are to be a chosen child of God.

God is good, all the time. Let us never take for granted our many blessings. And may we never forget that each and every one of our blessings came from the gracious hand of God.

Let all God's people say, "Thanks be to God."

Amen