

WIDENING THE CIRCLE

“OF OUR GRATEFUL REGARD”

Sixth in a sermon series by James R. Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA
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Text: Ephesians 5:20; James 1:2-5

Draw an imaginary circle. Inside that circle picture all the things and people you are thankful for: your comrades and comforts, luxuries and liberties, home, health and wellbeing. Outside are the things you would not typically be thankful for: your adversities and adversaries, sorrows and sicknesses, trials and troubles.

Here comes the Apostle Paul with what has always seemed to me to be a rather unreasonable assertion: “Be thankful for *all* things,” he chirps. Everything inside the circle and outside too! I have pondered this. How is it possible, how is it rational to be thankful not only when the lush and satisfying **fruit** spill out of the horn of plenty, but thorns and thistles too? How do we widen the circle of our grateful regard until it embraces all the realities of our lives, even the unseemly ones?

James gives us the rationale: ... “My brothers and sisters,” he says, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, *because* you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”

Why is it reasonable to be thankful, to be joyful not only in life’s joys but in life’s trials? Because those trials can produce a certain good fruit of their own. What fruit? Three words jump out of James’ text:

I. Faith

It’s not that some people have faith and others have not faith. We all have faith in something. *What* is your faith truly placed in? That is the question! The trials of our lives, the troubles of our lives test what our faith is in. Eugene Peterson’s translation of this passage has it this way: “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith life is forced into the open and shows its true colors.”¹

I can relate to that. Early in my life while I was growing up, a lot of troubles came into my life. Like most children, I felt like a city without walls, that I had no control over whatever circumstances came thundering in. I made up my mind early, that as soon as I got old enough to take control of the situation, I would take care of me. By the time I got to high school, I was excelling at sports, pulling my grades up, getting All-American honors and athletic scholarships. I was taking care of myself just fine, I thought. I had no use or need of a God. But my first year at an out-of-state university, all my self-reliance started to unravel. I became desperately lonely. At the big university, no one knew who I was, what successes I had attained. I started to wonder about the purpose of my life in this broad universe. I took philosophy classes, experimented with drugs, joined the peace movement. But I could not come up with an answer to my existential dilemma. I was lost. The demons of my childhood that I thought I had so neatly shut out came back to haunt me. Full scale despair was coming to gobble me up and I could no longer keep it at bay.

¹ *The Message*. NavPress.

I could **not** have told you then, but I **can tell** you now how thankful I am this terrible trial came to my life. Because if it had not, I might have continued to look to myself, rely on myself, trust in myself, and never have put my faith in Jesus Christ.

The trials of our lives tend to do that. They come to test our faith, to reveal just what our faith is really in.

Some folks put their faith in their own capabilities, their own talent, their own tenacity, as I did. Others put their faith in wealth or reputation or intelligence. But then along comes a trial of loss or sickness or sorrow that makes it impossible to trust those things any more. It is then that many of us find God or find God again. It is then that we admit that we cannot manage our lives, that we need a power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity.

How many of you look back on trials of your life that you once despised at the time; you look back now with the eye of gratitude; that they brought you to the faith that saved you? Not that you went looking for trials! But that when they come, God used them to center your faith in the right place! Faith! Now here's something else James suggests we can be thankful that our trials impart to us:

II. Character

I admire folks that can get out and run a five K race or marathon or decathlon or ride their bikes west on Los Osos Valley Road when the winds are blowing you the other way. How do people get to the point they can do those things? You know how they do it. They start out with a small challenge, develop the endurance to handle that; then they push themselves to a larger challenge, and so on. The trials of life, says James, are like that. They have the capacity to make us grow in stamina, grow in patience, grow in love. Look at the people you have known across the years of your life who are rich in these notes of character and you will see where they got them: Not in their life's happinesses, but in their life's hardships. Not that any of them went in search of hardship but that they made the most of the hardships that came their way.

Three things are sure in this life:

1. We all get our share of life's trials no matter who we are: saint or sinner, wise or foolish, rich or poor.
2. The trials that come our way will never leave us where they found us: they will either leave us better or bitter. They will either leave us weakened strengthened. The same sun that melts the wax, goes the saying, hardens the clay.
3. The outcome is a matter of our choice. Do we quit or press on? Do we let our trials teach us about our shortcomings so God can help us make changes in ourselves, or do we blame others? Do we stay with the struggle or do we pull the plug?

Oh, trouble's a ton, or a trouble's an ounce,

Or a trouble is what you make it.

And it isn't the fact that you're hurt that counts,

But only how did you take it.²

That's the heart of James' appeal isn't it? "Consider it all joy, sisters and brothers, when you encounter many kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. *And let endurance have its (complete) result* (that's the choice!) *so that you may be whole and complete, lacking in nothing.*"

Which leads to something else we can be thankful that the trials of life bring to us:

III. Wisdom

² From EV Cooke's poem: "How Did You Die?"

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

Why do we need to ask for wisdom when the trials and troubles of life hit us? Because it is those very trials that make us have to rethink life.

- Here are our dreams and assumptions of how we think life is going to treat us, and life deals us a different hand.
- Here we have our expectations of how things are going to turn out—in a job, a relationship, a marriage, our health—and they turn out differently.

“Reality is that which resists us, that which confronts us, that to which we have to adjust because it will not adjust to us.”³ How often the trials of our lives—trials of disagreement, trials of disappointment, trials of disability, trials of disillusionment, trials of doubt, trials of delay, trials of depression—how often it is in the trials of our lives that we find our dearly held expectations life and faith and God colliding with reality and that our expectations have to be adjusted.

It is in this very adjustment, this painful rethinking of notions, this stretching and deepening and broadening our view of life and faith and God, that we find the gift of wisdom.

“It is only in the light of a later morning, when our wounds have healed, that we have the eyes to see that flowers have bloomed in the soils of our anguish.”⁴

Which leads to something else we can be thankful for that our life’s trials teach us. Even though James doesn’t mention it, I will:

IV. Empathy

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” wrote Paul, “the father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who in any affliction with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Haven’t you noticed? That the people best equipped to help others are often those who have been through it themselves?

“The Samaritan who rescues you,” wrote Thackeray, “has most likely been robbed and has bled in his day, and it is a wounded arm that bandages yours.”

Henri Noewen called these Samaritans *wounded healers*.

Thank God for wounded healers. How bleak and cold the world would be, how lonely we would be with the pains and sorrows we must all bear, if we had not others to come to our support, who understand where we are and how we are feeling, because they’ve *been there*.

Have you ever thought of the possibility that the very infirmity, the very weakness or disadvantage, the very pain or sorrow that you couldn’t find any reason to be thankful for, could be a tool in the hand of God for the help of others who are going through the same thing?

Food for thought this Thanksgiving and Holiday season. May we widen the circles of our gratitude to embrace not just our triumphs but our trials, not just our luxuries but our lacks, not just our friends but our adversaries, not just our pleasures but our pains, not just our certainties but our doubts, not just our hopes but our disappointments.

Thank God for everything says Paul, not only for the blessings God *sends*, but for the blessing that God can *make* of the things that do not appear blessings.

For “we know,” says Paul, “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

Thanks be to God for God’s indescribable gift!

³ Paul Tillich

⁴ I do not know the author of this wonderful quote.