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First Christian Church
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Cookies and Prepositions: Thanksgiving Reflections

(Deuteronomy 8:7-18 NRSV) "...the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. 10 You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you. 11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. 17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NRSV) Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

I read a story not too long ago that I want to share with you:

One afternoon, a shopper at the local mall felt the need for a coffee break. So, first, from the little cookie store she bought herself a small bag of cookies and put them in her shopping bag. She then went next door to the Starbucks, got in line for coffee, found a place to sit at one of the crowded tables, and then – taking the lid off her coffee and taking out a magazine – she began to sip her coffee and read. Across the table from her a man sat reading a newspaper. After a

minute or two she reached out and took a cookie. As she did so, the man seated across the table reached out and took one too. This annoyed the woman, but she did not say anything. A few moments later she took another cookie. Once again the man did so too. Now she was getting a bit upset, but still she did not say anything. After having a couple of sips of coffee she once again took another cookie. So did the man. Now she was really upset - especially since now there was only one cookie left. Apparently the man also realized that there was only one cookie left, because before she could say anything he took it, broke it in half, offered half to her, and proceeded to eat the other half himself. Then he smiled at her and, putting the paper under his arm, stood up and walked away. Boy, was she ever steamed! Her coffee break ruined, already thinking ahead of how she would tell her family about this amazingly rude man, she folded her magazine, opened her shopping bag – and there discovered her own unopened bag of cookies.¹

Uh-oh. This is one of those moments – which I suspect we have all had and can so vividly remember and which still make us wince – where you just want to suddenly dematerialize and sink through the floor, or have Scotty beam you up to the Starship Enterprise, or anything at all to mask your own humiliation and realization that you have just done something spectacularly silly!

This story illustrates two things about being thankful, about gratitude. The first truth that this story illustrates is this: **we sometimes get confused about who we need to be thankful to - and we think *that it's ourselves***. Do you ever do that? I do

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This story can be found in many places on the internet; I adapted it from Rev. Richard J. Fairchild, <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-thansm.php>

sometimes. And it tends to happen most when I am feeling hurried and harried, or when I am feeling sorry for myself, or feeling under-appreciated. It is in those moments when we can find ourselves mentally saying “*Look at all I do. Thank goodness I’m around to do these things for my friend, husband, wife, children, parents*” – fill in your own blank here – “*wouldn’t have things nearly so easy. They’d appreciate me if I were gone. I just give and give and nobody appreciates me.*” Do you ever have those moments? You don’t have to raise your hand; we all have them, even if they are moments that none of us are particularly proud of later. And, **theologically**, it is precisely in those moments where we think and act as if **we** are responsible for the good things in our lives, the good things that we are able to do for others, the good things that happen on our watch. But we’re **not** responsible, at least not ultimately. Did you hear how the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy put it, there at the end of the passage, as XXX read it? “*Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he **who gives you power to get wealth.***” You have heard me use this line before and you will hear me use it again: there are no self-made Christians; there are, in fact, no self-made human beings. The power to do and be at all is surely not simply our own doing but is in so many, many ways a gift from other people and a gift from God. That’s that’s the first point this morning I want to make, inspired by that story of the cookie-confused woman: **never forget that it is God who is the source of every good thing in our lives!**

And there's a second point I think that we can take from this story, and it's related to our other scripture for this morning where Paul writes to the Thessalonian church – in what scholars think is Paul's earliest letter – “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances....*” I have no doubt that as the woman at Starbucks reflected on how she had behaved she was – I hope, anyway – moved to give thanks for what she could learn from that embarrassing, humiliating experience. She may have learned from this not to be so quick to see herself as the source of the blessings of her life but to realize – as the passage from Deuteronomy so powerfully puts it – that indeed the blessings in her life come because of the efforts of other people, not her. I hope she learned these things. I hope the experience became the topic of her prayers and conversations with God in the next few days, I hope it made her less unreflectively self-centered and more focused on how she is who she is because of God's working through other people.

But I also hope that she – and we – take care never, ever, ever **to inadvertently change the preposition** in Paul's writing. Prepositions are important things in English grammar. And grammar is not just some unnecessary and fussy thing. No, grammar sometimes is utterly crucial to what we mean, and if we get the grammar wrong we can make some theological terrible mistakes. After all, there is a big difference between the following sentences: “*I am going to work,*” “*I am going by work,*” “*I am going for work.*” The meaning of what is happening is very different depending on which little preposition is used. Using the wrong one can confuse both you and other people. But that's a rather trivial example. Travel writer Tom Haines has a rather scarier example. He tells

about crossing the Turkish border one night with some friends with whom he was traveling and being invited to come inside the building by one of the soldiers. And, of course, when men carrying rifles *invite* you to do something, it's not really an "invitation," now is it? (This is similar to the fact that they don't call it a jury *invitation*, but a jury **summons**!) So they went inside the building there at the border, wondering what was to become of them, and their fears were not reduced when the soldier who had invited them in came up to him and said to him and his group with this very hard-to-interpret little grin: "*Now, what can I do **to** you?*" As you might imagine, this caused Mr. Haines and his group to shudder a little. But then the guard laughed awkwardly and tried again: "*Now, what can I do **for** you? Would you like some tea?*"² Mr. Haines and his friends will tell you that prepositions are not, in fact, grammatical *luxuries* but, in this case, were absolutely crucial.

It is the same with what this story of the lady at Starbucks and Paul's words to the Thessalonian church teaches us. "*Give thanks **in** all circumstances,*" Paul says. I want you to please notice what he **doesn't** say, what prepositions he **doesn't** use. He doesn't say "Give thanks **for** all circumstances." He doesn't say "*Give thanks **because of** every circumstance.*" No, the prepositional difference is utterly crucial here: giving thanks **in the midst** of all circumstances is very, very different sometimes than giving thanks for those circumstances themselves. I'm quite sure our Starbucks lady would

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http://www.boston.com/travel/blog/2007/03/turkey_on_the_i.html **Emphasis mine.**

have loved to have learned her lesson a different way; it wasn't the circumstances, exactly, that she gave thanks for but the fact that even in such an encounter where she behaved so badly God was at work to bring the good that was possible. Her tablemate's heart was touched by a divine sort of graciousness – a graciousness to which he indeed responded well as he shared his cookies with this woman. For we know that sometimes folks don't, in fact, respond well to the best that God puts in front of them – but this man did. And so after the fact she could be thankful **in** the circumstance that God was there, working for good. But that's different from being thankful **for** the circumstance itself.

And if we can say all that about something so trivial as coffee and cookies, how much more can we say when the stakes are so much more profound. My brother's and my mother died four years ago this week. Her last months were hard. Her body increasingly failed and frustrated her. Her mind, so sharp and witty, become more dull-edged in the last month. She had to increasingly endure those creeping indignities that come with illness that were so sad to see in a person who had always been the very personification of what it means to be "a lady," one whose dignity was always so dear to her. Now, I am very, very glad for the sake of the gospel that Paul did not say "*Give thanks **for** these circumstances.*" For that would mean that God is cruel, and that God wanted those circumstances, and that God somehow was responsible for them. After all, you thank people when they are responsible for something. But what I am ever so grateful for is that Paul said, instead, give thanks ***in*** all circumstances – even circumstances such as these. But – give thanks for **what?**

For this: the center of the Gospel consists of two things for which we can indeed be profoundly thankful for: **first**, that God is never, ever absent; that God goes with us always and we are never abandoned now or unto eternity. And **second**, in every moment, God is seeking to bring the good that is possible. Sometimes, as with the man at Starbucks, the response is indeed good and gracious. But sometimes it is very unlike God's goodness. Sometimes human beings – whom God created to have free will – do not respond to the goodness God offers and they do evil instead. And sometimes the ravages of disease are finally such that the highest good is in fact *release* from an earthly, used up, damaged body. And my friends, I **will** follow Paul's good counsel to give thanks **in** all circumstances – for God is indeed never absent amidst even the most awful of circumstances, and God is at work in the midst of even those circumstances offering the highest good that is possible. In the Book of James there is a line that I have always thought expressed all this better than I ever could; James writes: *"No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one"* (James 1:13 NRSV). God is indeed never tempted to evil, and God is not the source of evil. No, God is the source of every good thing which we celebrate on this Thanksgiving Sunday and which we will celebrate among our family and our friends this Thursday.

Prepositions matter. God is ever and always good. **In** all circumstances, God is there. One of my favorite Thanksgiving hymns calls that "*wondrous*," and I agree:

Now thank we all our God,

*with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.*