

Church of the Crossroads
Thirty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Thanksgiving Sunday
November 19, 2006
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GRATITUDE OVERFLOWING

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

I have chosen a text for this morning's sermon. It is St. Paul's instruction to the Christians in Thessalonica: "Give thanks in all circumstances." (1 Thessalonians 5:18a)

I begin by recalling an old 1965 movie that you may also remember. It is called *Shenandoah* and it stars Jimmy Stewart who plays Charlie Anderson, a Virginia farmer who is caught up in the American Civil War. Anderson is anti-slavery and anti-war. However much he wants to stay apart from the violence and the killing, he is drawn into the conflict when his son is captured by the Union Army.

At the beginning of the film, Charlie Anderson's wife has already died. On her deathbed she made Charlie promise that he would bring up his children to be good Christians, and Charlie does so but with not a whole lot of heart and commitment. Secretly, he holds God responsible for the death of his wife, and his religious ambivalence is revealed in the opening scene of the movie when he offers a grace for the family meal. Charlie's grace is more of a declaration than a thanksgiving. "*Lord,*" he prays, "*we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you, Lord, just the same, for the food we're about to eat. Amen.*"

In the course of the film, his daughter falls in love with a Confederate soldier, his youngest son is captured and accused of being a spy, the Northern troops confiscate his farm, another son and his wife are murdered by looters, and his oldest son is accidentally killed. At the end of the film, after all this misfortune and suffering, Charlie Anderson again presides over a family meal, although now the family has been tragically diminished. Charlie tries to say grace, as his wife would have wanted, but he chokes and cannot find a single word of gratitude whatsoever.

I would not like to offer a contrasting picture. It was given to me by Frank Ward and is found in *Mennonite Weekly Review* of October 16, 2006. In an article about the Amish families who lost their five children when Charles Roberts, 32, entered a schoolhouse on October 2 and murdered them, the writer quotes Rita Rhoades, a Mennonite midwife who founded the Birth Care Center not far from the schoolhouse and a member of the New Holland Spanish Mennonite Church. Rhoades has served as a spokesperson for the Amish families who lost their children. She recently said in a telephone interview, “They [the families] are grateful for the outpouring of support and prayers, especially the prayers . . . They’re just trying not to be so public.”

The article continues:

Killed by Roberts were Naomi Rose Ebersole, 7; Anna Mae Stoltzfus, 12; Marian Fisher, 13; Mary Liz Miller, 8; and her sister Lena Miller, 7.

Funerals were held Oct. 5 for all but Stoltzfus, whose burial was held the next day, like those for the other children, in Bart Amish Cemetery.

Rhoades said the Amish have been grateful for the various funds set up to help defray medical costs among the families affected by the killings, and for one that will benefit Roberts’ widow and children.

She said that they also have appreciated the respect the media have shown for their religious faith and hope a positive witness has been presented to the rest of the world.

“They really are thankful for that,” Rhoades said.

In another article in the same *Mennonite Weekly News*, we learn more about the fund that will benefit the Roberts family. During its annual benefit auction Oct. 6, the Christiana Fire Company donated a portion of the proceeds from a quilt auction and other events to the Amish families. At the request of the local Amish community, a quarter of the funds raised by the Christiana auction was earmarked for the Roberts family.

“Give thanks in all circumstances,” said Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica. These words seem to describe the spirit of the Amish families and the larger Amish community. A great deal has been made of the spirit of forgiveness that the Amish families have extended to the Roberts family.

We, however, are no less impressed with the spirit of gratitude that permeates the life of these families. They have demonstrated that it is possible to be thankful in all circumstances. Their own thankfulness has led them to extend generosity to the family of the murderer of their children. Seventy-five of them were present for the funeral of Charles Roberts.

The apostle Paul does not just single out the instruction to be thankful in all circumstances apart from other practices that are to characterize the lives of Christians. “Be at peace among yourselves,” he writes. “Admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them,” he adds, and not only that, but “see that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,” and then, “give thanks in all circumstances.” All of these belong together, for the practice of one can lead to the practice of all.

Back to the film *Shenandoah*. Why was it that Charlie Anderson could not bring himself to give thanks in all circumstances? And why is it sometimes so difficult for us to be thankful, whatever happens? I believe the crux of the matter has to do with how we understand God’s relationship to human suffering. If, like Charlie Anderson, we blame God and hold God responsible for all human suffering, then we are going to have a hard time giving thanks in all circumstances. Instead of holding God responsible for all human suffering, it might be better for us to understand the human suffering that comes with poor health and disease as something that is a consequence of being human and not God, a consequence of being part of the creation rather than above it. For the earth itself is subject to decay and death, and human beings, being part of the earth, are subject to these as well. Further, much of human suffering, especially unmerited human suffering, is related to man’s inhumanity to man, and the human misuse of the earth. Such is the untold suffering resulting from war and famine.

As Dorothee Soelle reminded us in her book, simply called *Suffering*, God does not dole out human suffering as a punishment for sin or even a test for the righteous. To view God in this way is to make God a sadist, a God who willfully selects human beings to undergo suffering. That is not the God I want. That is not the God I need. “Only a suffering God can help,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

God is a God who suffers with all who suffer. In giving thanks in all circumstances, we are not thanking God *for* our suffering. We are giving thanks, knowing that even in our darkest night, God seeks to be present with us if we will allow God into our lives to comfort us, strengthen us, and grant us hope.

Knowing that God is a God who suffers with us enables us to give thanks in all circumstances. It is relatively easy for us to be grateful when everything is going well for us. Who cannot be grateful, even Charlie Anderson of the movie, for a suffering-free life. A deeper gratitude is to be discovered when human beings, like the Amish, find themselves giving thanks in all circumstances.

Again, such thankfulness, such gratitude in all circumstances, is an overflowing gratitude. Such gratitude influences all of our living. Such gratitude leads us, in the words of our weekly benediction, to hold fast to that which is good, never paying back wrong for wrong, but supporting the weak and the distressed and honoring all persons. Such gratitude leads us to rejoice always and pray continually.

May our season of Thanksgiving this year nourish within us a spirit of that deeper gratitude that can give thanks in all circumstances, that deeper gratitude that overflows into all of our lives. So will the whole of our life be a thanksgiving and a praise unto God. Amen.