

In Everything Give Thanks

Have any of you read the Mitford books, by Jan Karon? They're an enormously popular series set in the fictional town of Mitford, somewhere in the American South. These books are what I call "warm fuzzies"—the kind of stories I read when I'm tired and low and want to feel better about humankind and the state of the world.

The main character is Father Timothy Kavanaugh, an Episcopal priest. Through his eyes, we get to know the people of Mitford, who are as ordinary—and as unique—as the residents of any small town, anywhere. Father Tim, himself, is very unassuming—a kind, and humble man of deep faith, who is just trying to do his best to be the person he believes God wants him to be.

In one of the books in the series, Father Tim and his wife, Cynthia, are preparing to spend a year at a small mission church deep in one of the poorest parts of Appalachia. Father Tim has reached retirement, but he finds that he misses the life of active ministry. So he's looking forward to this new adventure. But Father Tim also has a problem—he's developed a serious case of diabetes.

Like so many of us, he's not always good about watching his diet and maintaining his exercise program. Father Tim's condition starts to get out of balance, as he makes one poor choice after another, until he ends up blacking out at the wheel of his car. He goes off the road and hits a pedestrian and his dog, killing the dog and injuring the pedestrian. Father Tim ends up in the hospital in a diabetic coma. When his condition improves, he discovers that the man he ran into is a colleague whose little dog was his constant companion.

Father Tim is devastated. He feels terribly guilty for not paying attention to all the warning signs that his condition was getting out of control. He hardly knows how to face the man he hit, and his doctor tells him, in no uncertain terms, that he's not well enough to go and serve the small mission church in Appalachia—a prospect that had brought him a new sense of excitement and purpose. Suddenly, his whole life seems to be in a shambles.

This is a dark, dark time, for Father Tim. But a verse of scripture keeps intruding into his unhappy thoughts, a verse from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, which sounds very like our reading from Philippians: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances* (1 Thess. 5:16-18a), or, as Father Tim hears it in the old King James version, *in everything give thanks*.

This verse really challenges Father Tim. What does God want him to do? Is he really supposed to give thanks for all the awful things that have been happening to him? Then Father Tim realizes that Paul tells us to give thanks "in" everything, or "in" all circumstances, and not "for" everything. God's intention for all of us is our health and well-being. God didn't give Father

Tim diabetes, or cause him to black out and hit his friend. We're not asked to give thanks *for* the bad things that happen to us. But, *in* every circumstance, we are asked to give thanks in the assurance that God is with us, even in the darkest times.

Our Puritan forebears certainly knew what it meant to give thanks in all circumstances. Our Thanksgiving Day celebration began with a harvest feast shared by the Puritans and their Indian friends, in 1621. They had arrived in the new world, in November of 1620, poorly prepared for the extreme harshness of their first New England winter. More than half of them died of disease and starvation, that first year.

The following spring, a native named Squanto came to live with them. Squanto had been captured by the Spanish as a child, to be sold into slavery, but he had been purchased by monks, taught Christianity, and freed. He taught the Pilgrims how to plant, fish, hunt and trade with the neighboring Wampanoag tribe. Their first harvest was a success, and the grateful Pilgrims celebrated by giving thanks to God with a great harvest feast.

But in the next two years, the settlers endured crisis after crisis. Winters continued to be harsh, and a twelve-week drought, the following summer, destroyed their crops. In the winter of 1622, they nearly ran out of food. Each person was given a daily ration of just five kernels of corn. The next summer, the rains returned and their crops flourished. The Puritans held a second great harvest feast in 1623. To remind themselves of the harsh winter, and of the grace of God that brought them through it, the first course was a plate holding just five kernels of corn.

There's a story in the Book of Acts about how Paul and his companion, Silas, were thrown into prison during his first visit to Philippi. Even though they had been stripped of their clothing, beaten, and thrown into a cell, where their feet were fastened in stocks, they spent their time praying and singing hymns to God. Here is Paul putting his money where his mouth is, giving thanks to God in all circumstances.

When he wrote the Letter to the Philippians, several years later, he was again in prison. It's clear from this letter that Paul was able to give thanks to God in everything because he was so grateful for all that God had already done for him. He also trusted that, when we ask for God's help, God can turn even the most difficult situations to the good, sometimes in the most amazing ways. I have experienced this myself, and I've heard stories from others who have, too. And yet, when I am in a dark time, I find it very hard to follow Paul's advice to the Philippians: *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

How can I possibly not worry? I'm a world-class worrier! But Paul's advice is solid: Continue to rejoice in your relationship with God. Stay gentle— *be* gentle— don't tighten up around your worries, but instead *Let your gentleness be known to everyone.* Put your worries into prayer, make your requests known to God, and do so *with thanksgiving.* This is what will help us to find *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.*

When he goes on to say that this will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, I believe he means this quite literally. This whole passage is a prescription for maintaining spiritual health and well-being during difficult times. Paul tells us what to focus on, what to pay attention to, what to turn our minds toward in the face of circumstances that bring fear and anxiety: *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* After he advises us on how to think, he tells us how we should act: *Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.* Another way of saying this, according to another quote from Paul, is to *live in love as Christ loved us.* (Eph. 5:2)

To many of us, the current divided state of our country feels difficult and painful, and you may really be wondering where God is in this situation. And even more, like Father Tim, you may be finding it difficult to “*give thanks to God in all circumstances.*” But I’m going to invite you to do just that, during the time of silence after the sermon. Give thanks to God for all that is good in your life, and in the world, remembering what is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is pure, what is pleasing, what is commendable or worthy of praise.

And here’s another suggestion. As you begin your Thanksgiving dinner, imagine that there are just five kernels of corn on your empty plate. You might even put five real kernels on each person’s plate. Think about what it would be like to have this as your daily ration, and give thanks to God for the abundance God has given you. Giving thanks is something that improves with practice. If we begin with what is obvious and easy, giving thanks for the good that has already happened in our lives, before long, we’ll be able to take on the more difficult challenge of looking for grace and blessing— giving thanks “in all circumstances”— even when things aren’t going so well.

So now, in silence, let us give thanks to God.