Be Thankful Always! (I Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Good morning! I always feel honored to be with you and to have an opportunity to reflect on the Word of God with you. I thank Rev. Cho for this opportunity to celebrate this very special service of worship. Today, we are celebrating the Thanksgiving Sunday through which we remind ourselves, and each other, of the many blessings God has bestowed upon us in the past, now, and will bestow in the future.

We look back and reflect on things, events, that had happened in our lives this year. Some were good and some were not so good. Some brought us joy and happiness and some heartaches, tears, and pain. But, today, we are here as the community of God saying together, “Through it all, God has shown us his love and he has sustained our lives.” We are here to proclaim our faith that it is through God’s abounding mercy that we are able to move on with our lives.

Keeping that in mind, I would like to meditate on the scripture verses from First Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 16-18. No doubt these verses are so familiar to all of us. “Rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances.” As Apostle Paul writes these words, he also reminds us that these are God’s will for all of us, Christian, in Christ Jesus.

In order for us to fully grasp the importance of these verses and also to reflect on the relevancy of today’s scripture text in our current life situations, we need to review our bible knowledge on the church of Thessalonica. As we all know, Thessalonica is the modern-day Greece, the northern Greece. And it is understood that Paul wrote this letter around 51 or 52 AD from Corinth. The Church of Thessalonica was a gentile church although there were also Jewish Christians who were present in small numbers.

What we also know is that the Church of Thessalonica was a very faithful church. Like many other places in Paul’s time, there was great persecution for Christians in Thessalonica. Yet the members of the Thessalonian church stood firm in their faith in Christ. So

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when we look at verse 6 in the first chapter, Paul says these words. “You became imitators of us in the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message of the Lord with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”

In first Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 9-10, we also see that the church of Thessalonica was a faith community that was full of love. It was an exemplary church in terms of practicing God’s love towards one another and others outside the church. These are Paul’s words about the Thessalonian church. “About brotherly love, there is nothing we can say. You demonstrate your love taught by God so well not only to each other but also to brothers and sisters throughout all Macedonia.” - I am paraphrasing these two verses. It was a model church to all believers in Macedonia. Under severe persecution, the members of the Thessalonian church were suffering in many ways, but they were not hesitant to reach out to others who were also suffering and help them.

Amid severe suffering and persecutions, they did not give in and give up their faith. They stood firm and kept their faith in Christ. Not only did they keep their faith, they also took care of those who were in need and shared what they had as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is how St. Paul summarizes the church of Thessalonica in the first chapter verse 3. “I continually remember all of you before God your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because of their unshakable faith even in the midst of persecution and suffering, and because they were so

faithful in following God’s love in their daily lives, St. Paul declares, “Indeed, you are my glory and joy” in the chapter 2 verse 20. This is the context in which St. Paul is urging the Christians in Thessalonica “Rejoice always. Pray continually and be thankful in all circumstances.”

We pause and look around us to see what is happening today. Coronavirus has been affecting all of us almost all year. The magnitude of the effect of COVID-19 has been something that we could not have imagined in our lifetime. And, so many of us are suffering and are going through

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such hardships. Although the news about vaccines for the virus gives us a glimpse of hope for ending the virus, many of us wonder how many people must die before this pandemic ends. Our situation today does not help us to be in a thankful mood.

A few weeks ago, I had a phone conversation with one of my friends. He is a business man, the owner of an import-export business in Manhattan. Economically, he is going through a very difficult time and told me that he has no time to be thankful these days. I knew well what he meant and what he was going through. I told him to pause time to time and take a deep breath. About a week later, I had a chance to talk to him again. He said he was much happier. While reading Romans for his daily meditation, he ran across the 28th verse in chapter 8. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.”

For him, nothing has changed in terms of his economic situations since I spoke to him a week earlier. He still has to come up with money to pay his rent, salary for his employees, shipping companies for his merchandise, the mortgage for his house. As we can imagine, the list goes on and on. What changed, however, was the understanding of his relationship with God. He was able to re-focus on his relationship with God and remembered How God made things possible for him through his life. There were many crises in his business in the past. But he was able to manage all those crises and he again realized that it was God’s grace that made him through. What he told me was that God who made all things possible in the past will also help him to move through this difficult time. And for that reason, he can still rejoice and give thanks to God in the midst of hardships and difficult situations.

In the gospel of John chapter 14 verse 1, Jesus said “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me.” When we trust in God, he will work for the good of me in all things. No

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Matter what happens, it will be by God working together for my own good. And, this is the reason why we can rejoice and be thankful. What matters is our relationship with our God who has called us to be his people and guides every step of our lives.

For those who are Christians, “rejoice and be in gratitude” cannot just be an option. It is God’s will towards all who claim to be Christians. The very fact that we have our intimate relationship with Christ is more than sufficient reason to be thankful. Of course, we should rejoice and be thankful when things are going according to our plans. But, we should also rejoice and be thankful even if things do not go well as we planned because we have God who is in control. In this way, rejoice and be thankful become mandatory, requirement for all Christians.

Some times, we go through life, thinking that things happen as a result of luck or chance. Occasionally, we go through life as though it is a course of events over which none has control. It just happens to happen that way. And then we become bitter, angry, complaining, disappointed and depressed when things do not happen the way we want it to be.

This morning, as we celebrate the Thanksgiving Sunday, we hear the Word of God saying, “Rejoice and be thankful always.” As the people of God, we can rejoice and be thankful all the time because our God is the one who makes all things to work together for our own good. During the St. Paul’s time, Christians in Thessalonica lived a life that resembled the life of Christ even in the midst of severe hardships and suffering.

As we all know, we as the modern-day Christians are also commanded to live our lives resembling that of Christ. In this season of Thanksgiving, we should look back and see how God has blessed us and our family. We offer our thanksgiving for the many blessings we have received but more importantly we give thanks for God’s love that surrounds us. And, we extend our hands to those around us, especially those who are in need of our help and accompaniment, sharing our joy and gratitude.