

11-20-2007, Thanksgiving Sunday
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

Gratitude is a Choice
Ezekiel 34:11-16

One time I was talking with a psychologist about how people deal with difficulties in their lives. I made the statement that the best way to help people deal with things they couldn't change was to help them see these things differently. Sometimes something that looks bad turns out not to be so bad if you just look at it differently. The psychologist said, "Yes, that's an important technique in counseling. We have a name for it. We call it reframing." You know how you can look at a scene in a camera and it looks one way. Then you look at the same scene from another direction and it looks completely different. Photographers call that reframing the picture. In counseling we can often help people by inviting them to reframe the problems in their lives. When they do, they often find something good about their situation they hadn't seen before."

Now if that sounds a little complicated, I'll just remind you of the story "Pollyanna." Most of you have seen that Disney movie at some time or another. It stars Hayley Mills as a young girl who is orphaned and sent to live with a cold and distant aunt. Most people would have wilted in that very painful and difficult situation. However, she thrived. The reason was that her deceased father taught her to be grateful for everything that happened in her life. Pollyanna was very good about reframing the events in her life. She would find a way to look at them in such a way that she could see something to be grateful for.

The most outstanding example of her ability to find something good in every situation was in a conversation following the church service. The minister was a hellfire and damnation preacher with a voice that literally shook the rafters. The first words of his sermon were, "Death comes unexpectedly." Then he proceeded to warn them of the fierce anger of a holy and righteous God. Almost everyone came out of that service depressed and shaken. One of Pollyanna's aunt's servants asked her what she could find to be grateful for about that service. Pollyanna's response was, "I'm grateful that I have a whole new week before I have to hear him preach again."

Now, I know that Pollyanna has gotten a bad rap. If someone calls you a Pollyanna, they mean that you are so upbeat because you are too naïve or uninformed to know how bad things really are. The truth is Pollyanna was very much aware of her situation. She chose to look for the good in her life.

Pollyanna was living out a Biblical principle. This was no accident. Her deceased father was a minister. He taught her to live the way the Bible teaches us to live, trusting in God's goodness and power

In the Old Testament, when the Jews were conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile, many of them were overcome with grief and sorrow. The Book of Lamentations is exactly that. It is prayers of lamentations, as the prophet Jeremiah pours out his grief and his pain over the destruction of his people, his nation, and the Temple. Many of the people were ready to give up and die. However, God began to give the prophets a new message. God told them that this was a chance for a new start. As a nation, they had become so sinful and corrupt that they needed to start over again. God

promised that they would return to Jerusalem. But this time things would be different. They would be a holy and righteous people. The prophets helped the people reframe this experience. By their messages they were able to help the people see that what looked like a terrible catastrophe was actually an opportunity for a new and better way of life.

In the New Testament Paul says, "In all things God works for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose."

Not everything that happens to us is good. However, if you look at even the worst situations with the eyes of faith, you can see God working to bring something good out of it. If you will trust God and hold on to your faith, God will bring something good out of it.

That's why Paul could say, "In all things give thanks." I know that's a hard thing to do. There are things that happen to us that we simply cannot give thanks for. They are too painful. However, if we will refuse to give in to despair and hopelessness and, instead, set our minds on the blessings in our lives, giving thanks to God for the many good things we enjoy, slowly but surely, we will be able to see things in a different way. We will reframe our lives. We will see that our lives are good.

We need to remind ourselves to look for the good.

As the old gospel song says, "When upon life's journey you are tempest tossed, do not be discouraged thinking all is lost. Count your many blessings--name them one by one--and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

Even the secular world knows this. Bing Crosby recorded a top-selling song many years ago in which he crooned, "When I get worried, and I can't sleep, I just count my blessings, instead of sheep, and I fall asleep, counting my blessings."

Do you have a good life? It depends on how you look at it. If you focus on your problems, if you focus on your disappointments, if you focus on your sorrows, if you focus on troubles, your life will look awful.

However, if you focus on your blessings, it's a good life. If you have friends and family who love you, if you have a home, if you have enough food to eat, if you have work to do, you are doing pretty well.

If you focus on people who have more than you, you will be envious and discontented. If you remember the great many people who have less than we do, you will be grateful for what you do have. It's your choice.

Most of the people in the world look at us here in America and wonder how we could be anything but grateful. After all, we are the richest and most powerful nation in the world. We have one of the highest standards of living in the world. We enjoy freedom and security.

However, sadly, even here some people choose to see only what they don't have. As much as we have, some are not satisfied. They have chosen to see their lives in the worst light. It's their choice.

I encourage you to make a different choice. Choose to count your blessings. Choose to recognize the many ways God has been good to you. And choose to remember that the greatest blessing is not the blessings themselves, but the One who blesses us. We were created and are cared for by One who loves us more than life itself. We have a Lord and Savior who was willing to lay down his life for our salvation.

That means that as we enjoy the blessings we have in our lives, we can say, "All this and heaven too."

Thanksgiving is when we as a nation stop and remind ourselves of the power of reframing our lives.

Do we have a good life? It depends on how you look at it. If we look at our lives through the eyes of faith, we have to say, "Our lives are very good. Thanks be to God."

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