

Sermon: "You've Got to Be Kidding Me!"

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I Thessalonians 5:18 (Context 1 – 1; key 16-18)

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According to legend, a young man while roaming the desert came across a spring of delicious crystal-clear water. The water was so sweet he filled his leather canteen so he could bring some back to a tribal elder who had been his teacher.

After a four-day journey he presented the water to the old man who took a deep drink, smiled warmly and thanked his student lavishly for the sweet water. The young man returned to his village with a happy heart.

Later, the teacher let another student taste the water. He spat it out, saying it was awful. It apparently had become stale because of the old leather container.

The student challenged his teacher: "Master, the water was foul. Why did you pretend to like it?"

The teacher replied, "You only tasted the water. I tasted the gift. The water was simply the container for an act of loving-kindness and nothing could be sweeter."!!!

On September 28<sup>th</sup> Renea Hall took her six year old son Jacob to his Elementary School in South Carolina. He was where he was supposed to be. Jacob loved Super Heroes and he wanted to change the world. At recess Jacob was playing on the playground when a 14 year old male opened fire hitting two students and a teacher. Jacob was shot in the leg and lost 75% of his blood supply. He was placed on life support and died on October 1<sup>st</sup>.









In a statement to People Magazine Renae Hall said, “Jacob was forgiving. What happened to Jacob he forgives already. He’s in heaven smiling down at us. He’s asking his mommy to be able to be strong, to forgive just like he would have. Jacob came into our lives six years and four months ago and changed us completely. He showed us how to love, laugh and smile even on days we did not want to. God gave him to us and he was taken away from us by a senseless act.”

Many of us will be sitting down to a Thanksgiving meal with family and friends today, others may be celebrating on Monday while some may be alone. If you are alone please let me know. My family is celebrating this evening and I am opening my home for a Thanksgiving meal on Monday evening to LSU folks who are alone this Thanksgiving. Those of us celebrating with family understand how wonderful and tense holiday meals can be. Some of us try to stay away from topics such as religion and politics (although in my house these are staple conversations), and we try to be welcoming to the estranged relative, the over drinker, the over talker, the know-it-all, the dramatic victim, the martyr, you know what I'm talking about. We bless the meal and dig into the food, and then we dig into topics we just can't keep inside and then we dig into one another. Then there are other Thanksgiving meals when no one feels like celebrating or being thankful because Grandmother died and we miss her and no one knows how to make her dressing. We don't feel thankful because little Kimberly was hit by a drunk driver as she walked in the crosswalk after school or because Mom is waiting for results from her biopsy or Dad was just laid off from work or 11<sup>th</sup> grader Kyle is away for his second stint in rehab or family members who live far away are unable to join us and we miss them.

In my family, we place a pile of pictures from years gone by and we all take turns talking about what we are grateful for and for all the people, things and experiences that give our life meaning. But what if your life doesn't seem filled with good and meaningful things? What if you're having trouble thinking of something or someone to be thankful for this year? Have you ever heard anyone say, "I can't think of a single thing to be thankful for...sorry"?

The truth is that many of us inside these walls and especially outside these walls are experiencing devastation and heartbreak, change and transition, scarcity and fear, doubt and discouragement, loneliness and a feeling of no longer having a purpose that matters to us or to anyone else. And you may be feeling like saying, "You've got to be kidding me! How am I supposed to be thankful for this?"

"In everything (all circumstances), give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:18) In everything? Are you kidding me?

My child is in a coffin. My mother just died. The bank is going to foreclose on my house. My physical pain is off the charts. My heart is broken. Lies have been told about me and some people believe them. I have too much

pressure to perform to be thankful. My disease is out of remission and everything is uncertain.

What in this physical world was Paul talking about when he wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica? Paul planted this church in a port city where multitudes were interacting and engaged in commerce. Shortly after planting the church the Jews harassed him (remember he was called to take the gospel to the Gentiles – Acts 15 Council of Antioch where Paul and Peter went their separate ways), and then they ran him out of town. Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonian congregation almost immediately after being forced to leave. The letters were written to equip young believers with the basics of faith, to answer questions, solve problems (Paul was their spiritual father), and cast visions for what God desired to do on earth. Good leaders lead based upon the needs of their audience. The spiritually young Thessalonians needed to hear things from Paul that other churches did not so he had to give them a big picture perspective on expectations of how to live and what to expect from Christ – God. Paul sent young Timothy to check on the church's growth and spiritual health. He constructed a plan for the church and he followed through with his plans. He dispatched leaders to identify and equip local leaders on ground zero and his social media venue was writing letters. Paul was a futurist, a visionary, who also lived with both feet on the ground of NOW.

This is our historical context and this is our context today. I love all of you and want to help you focus on a bright and promising future rather than a fond and memorable past that keeps us locked into doing things the way we've always done them expecting growth and spiritual health. I want to lead us into all God has for us instead of focusing on disappointments, painful experiences and things that have happened that we cannot change. I want to hear what your needs and dreams are and help you live into them and bring them to fruition. And most of all, I want to lead by example, showing you that living into a tough today is possible when we love and trust God who has something new, something good and something healing waiting for us to experience and celebrate. How am I going to do this? By being thankful for all that has been, for all that is and all that will be.

What kind of Thanksgiving are you looking forward to this year? Are you the cook? Will you have tons of leftovers to disperse to family and friends? Will you be leading the conversation around the table asking what others are thankful for or will you be moaning on the inside as you survey the



plenty around you and think in your heart that your life is empty of meaning? What do we do when others around us are full of joy and thanksgiving and all we want to say very loud is ARE YOU KIDDING ME! What do we do? We trust and believe that God is working beyond our circumstance, beyond what we can see and understand. What is the good that God is going to bring out of Jacob Hall's death? I don't know. All I know is that God has not abandoned the Hall family or any of us. God is intimately aware of what is going on and how we feel. Someday, and I don't know when that day is going to be, we will see that the promises of God are true and God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called and gifted by Her to fulfill a purpose. We can be thankful all of the time because God is good and God's character/nature is good and He loves us at all times, not just when She feels like it, not just when we are making her heart feel loved and pride for us as Her children. God is good and His love endures forever; and Her faithfulness continues through all generations (Psalm 100:5). We can give thanks in all circumstances because we affirm, trust and celebrate the heart of God. When life doesn't make sense, we know that God will make sense out of things. When we are devastated and hurt, we know that God is holding us close. When we doubt, God is teaching us to trust. When we are at our Thanksgiving table without anything to speak into the circle we can turn to God and God will lift our countenance. I pray that we will open our eyes to see our lives are filled to overflowing with the goodness and promises of God. I pray that we will cling to God's goodness and love during the most desolate times and think, whisper or shout, THANKS BE TO GOD who is with me and loves me in all circumstances.

How do we become thankful in all things? We learn who we are and who God is and we affirm these truths every morning until they are written on our hearts and we can speak them into every circumstance.

When Sarah was 3 years old I was on a ladder stenciling a border around the wall of our living when suddenly she began bringing me her play tea cup full of water.

In her squeaky voice, she walked up to the ladder and held out her cup and said, "Mommy you thirsty?" I said, "Oh yes honey. You are so sweet. Thank you." Then I would climb down the ladder, drink the water and hand the teacup back to Sarah. This happened four times until this thought came to me: "Sarah cannot reach the faucet in the bathroom and that is the direction from which she is coming."

So I followed Sarah as she took her fifth trip to our bathroom and I watched her carefully dip the cup into the toilet and then wipe the water off the sides. I hurried back to my ladder and waited. Sarah arrived once again, smiling and precious. "Mommy, you thirsty?" I said, "Not anymore honey. But thank you so much for thinking of me. Can I have the teacup as a special memory?"

Sarah smiled and handed me the cup and I kissed her on the cheek.

The next week I asked Sarah to help me clean the bathroom and after that she never dipped a cup into the toilet again.

May we leave this place, affirming the imperfections and gifts of ourselves, others and this physical journey. May we dare to trust God's heart, living into gratitude, trusting the One who rides the storm, bringing us rainbows. May we have eyes to see the giver and the gift even when the water may be tainted. May we dare to live and love greatly. Amen