

“It is good to give thanks to the Lord,” said the psalmist. How many of you gave thanks to the Lord for your extra hour last night, whether you just stayed up longer or used that extra hour to sleep? Fall Back is my favorite night of the year, while Spring Forward is my least favorite night of the year. Yet, what is interesting is that the seasons of the sun determined by the beginning or ending of Day Light Savings, have just the opposite effect for me!

My least favorite season of the sun is the season that begins today after my favorite night! I do not appreciate the long evenings created by the end of Day Light Savings, when darkness takes root in the five o'clock hour, whereas, I love the season of wonderful evening sunlight when we spring ahead each year. My favorite night creates a not-so-favorite season of the sun. My least favorite night creates a favorite season-of-the sun.

Isn't that the irony of life sometimes? We love our vacations yet, we struggle to prepare for them and coming back to a sea of dirty laundry or stockpiled things to do is no fun. A young couple can't wait for the birth of their new baby, but then there are the sleepless nights that follow. We love celebrating big days such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, but then there is clean up to do. What we most enjoy; often comes with some responsibilities that we would rather not have.

Apostle Paul knew this truth all too well. “To the church of God that is in Corinth... Thanks, be to God... [for] through us, [God] brings knowledge of Christ to others.” Paul enjoyed sharing the Gospel, but in sharing the Gospel he met resistance. In his zeal for ministry, he met critics. Apostle Paul and those who were in ministry with him were at constant risk for the sake of Jesus. They loved preaching and teaching the word, but the responsibility of walking faithfully in Christ in the midst of adversaries was daunting. Yet, Paul knew that sometimes the worst circumstances, often created the most fruitful outcomes.

Listen this morning for God's word to us through Paul's letter to the church at Corinth:

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you. ¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture— “I believed, and so I spoke”— we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

The Word of the living God!
Thanks, be to God!

One of the joys of moving to this new community is that friends from a distance come to visit us. Today, Paul and I have our friends Merle and Mary Ann who have come to worship with us. They bring with them greetings from the church I served for 14-1/2 years in Garden Grove.

Last weekend, Paul and I had an extended family of friends who came together from literally around the globe - from Germany, Alabama and Long Beach! This weekend friends from Goleta made their way to our home. Our friend, Debbie sits on the Board of the Forest Home Conference Center, which is just a short 20-minute drive from our home now. So, when Debbie and her husband, John, make the trek from Goleta for board meetings, they now stop in for a visit. So, on Thursday, they stopped by for dinner. Then on Friday night we made the trek into Cerritos, to spend time with our family and some friends.

Friends are a wonderful blessing in all of our lives. Yet, having friends comes with responsibilities too, as we listen to each other's lives. One of my friends leaned in to me at the very noisy restaurant where we were eating, and she whispered into my ear, "It has been a month." I immediately knew something deeper than causal conversation was about to unfold, as it had been a month since she ran for her life from the bullets being fired into the Route 91 concert goers in Las Vegas. Four people dining with us this past Friday, ran for their lives that October evening. The night before our friends from Goleta shared that they had been impacted by Route 91, as well. Debbie was instrumental in helping plan the funeral of a young woman from their church who died in the Las Vegas shooting.

As I listened to my friends who have been directly touched by the tragedy of Las Vegas, I could not help but hear these words from Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, "We are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down... but we are not crushed, despairing, forsaken or destroyed."

There was a sense of resilience, a river of hope, a confidence in my friends that this recent tragedy is not, and will not be, their whole story. Tragedy and death is not the whole story. Like so many other tragedies and natural disasters from Barcelona to 911, from Puerto Rico to Houston, from Boston to Sandy Hook, from Napa to Santa Rosa, from Las Vegas to the most recent truck attack in New York, as people of faith know that death is not the whole story.

"We have this treasure in clay jars," said Apostle Paul. Yes, you and I are like clay jars. We are fragile, breakable human beings. We are susceptible to death at any given moment. We even have death at work within us since the day we were born. Yet, death is not the whole story, because God chooses clay jars like us to bear witness to the divine glory. As Apostle Paul said through the words of Eugene Peterson, "What Jesus did among others, he does in us – he lives!" God is at work in us, transforming us. God's incomparable power is with us, continually bringing life out of the death, life out of the darkness that tries so desperately to swallow us.

There was a sense of resilience, a sense of hope, a confidence in Apostle Paul that could not be quenched even though he was afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Hence, he said to the believers in Corinth, "We're not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times." We're not about to give up sharing this message of hope. We're not about to give up speaking

about Christ or living through Christ or inviting others to experience to the grace and power of Christ, even if the way forward is hard and difficult.

What about you? What about us as a church? When afflictions, perplexities, persecution or even death enter our lives, will we give up? Will we lose heart? Will we allow death to have the final word? Or will we be confident in the power of God at work within us, even though we are as fragile as clay jars?

How many of you remember Mister Rogers' Neighborhood? It was a half-hour children's television series which originated in 1963 and continued until 2001. Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, graduating from Pittsburg Theological Seminary. In an interview with CNN in his later years, Rogers shared why he had to speak through television, for he stated, "I went into television because I hated it so, and I thought there's some way of using this fabulous instrument to nurture those who would watch and listen." I hear Apostle Paul's words, "We're not keeping quiet, not on your life." I believe and so I speak!

Rogers was deterred by the way things were, especially things that were tragic and seemingly bent on death. He attributed his confidence to his mother's faith that taught him early on to stay focused on those who promoted life in the midst of death. Rogers remembers his childhood saying, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world." There are so many caring people even in the midst of tragedies that cause afflictions, perplexities, persecution and death.

"Look for the helpers." Look for those who do not lose heart in the midst of life with all its ups and downs, joys and sorrows, favorites and least favorites. Look for those who do not lose heart in the midst of tragedies or natural disasters. Look for those whose confidence in God keeps them going when the going gets tough. Look for those who don't let others dissuade them from the work of loving God and loving others. Look for those who believe in Christ and bear witness to the incomparable power of God at work within them, bring light out of darkness and life out of death.

We have this treasure in clay jars – yet do we fully claim this treasure? Do we fully claim the power of God at work within us and through us? Do we recognize the gift of mercy and grace that is new every morning for us? Are we able to declare God's steadfast love each morning as we wake and God's faithfulness at the close of each day? At the works of God's hands in your life, are you able to sing for joy?

I remember my first surgery. It was a knee surgery for a meniscus tear. It should have been a breeze given it was laparoscopic, but I had a severe reaction to the anesthesia. It took me hours to wake from surgery and then the dreaded nausea wouldn't subside. Same day surgery at 7 a.m., but I wasn't released to head home until almost 6 pm in the evening. Paul and my boys were headed to a youth retreat for the weekend, so a dear friend was scheduled to care for me. She tucked me into bed and hovered over me, tending to my every need.

I remember feeling absolutely awful, for I certainly was like a fragile clay jar. But, something within me shifted, because I knew that I was not alone. I knew that God was with me, as sure as my dear friend who tended to my needs. And what happened next was thanksgiving increased. I gave thanks for my friend, for my bed, for my warm

covers, for my home, for the medical coverage that enabled healing, well thanksgiving abounded within me and my affliction did not crush me. I wasn't driven to despair. I didn't feel forsaken. I felt grateful for God's provision.

As we begin this season of Grace and Gratitude, I want us to ponder deeply Mary Oliver's challenge, for she writes: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Some of us may have decades ahead of us, while others may have far less. Yet, God's incomparable power is at work within us, for we are the work of God's hands. So, are we going to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into hardships? Or are we going to believe in God's grace for our lives, which moves us from death to life again and again in this present age and for all eternity?

Increase thanksgiving, for this is the fuel that will ignite God's incomparable power at work within us and through us. Increase thanksgiving; be glad at the works of God's hands in our lives! Amen!