

## “Tobacco Blessing”

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*[The Apostle Paul said,]*

*<sup>14</sup>And we exhort you, [brothers sisters], admonish the idlers,  
encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*

*<sup>15</sup>See that none of you repays evil for evil,  
but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*

*<sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray constantly, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

*1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:14-18*

We recently celebrated our Community Thanksgiving Service here  
and considering that we are still in the seasonal neighborhood of Thanksgiving,  
it doesn't hurt to revisit what it means to 'be thankful'.

Now, some of us might question just how appropriate these days  
that the theme of 'thanksgiving' really is, with so many current events  
that have been tragic and disturbing.

However,

'giving thanks' can prove to be a very relevant – and practical approach to life,  
especially in the midst of uncertain and unpleasant circumstances.

It implies being true to one's intention by not taking blessings for granted...

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch girl who – along with her father and older sister,  
actively shielded Jewish people from the Nazis during WWII in their home.

Their story is documented in her autobiography called, The Hiding Place.

They were discovered and arrested,

then sent to prison where her father would die soon after.

It is to their credit that all but one of the people they had hidden,  
were rescued and escaped.

While at a concentration camp for non-Jewish inmates,

Corrie's older sister, Betsie, demonstrated an amazing resilience  
that was rooted in her deep faith as a Christian.

Betsie organized a Bible study and group prayers among the other women  
which they carried out in secret at night in their barracks.

Corrie was entrusted with a tiny copy of the Bible

which she wore on a string around her neck under her clothes.

On a number of occasions, Betsie surprised Corrie

by demonstrating a radical attitude of thankfulness.

A specific example was upon their arrival at the German camp called Ravensbruck,  
when they found the women's barracks to be filthy and flea-ridden.

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Corrie was in despair and asked how they could ever cope with this,  
but her sister began to pray, simply saying, 'Show us. Show us how.'  
Then, Betsie urged Corrie to re-read a passage from the Bible  
which they had read together earlier – 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18.  
Betsie seized upon a particular verse as their guide for how to manage  
under these dreadful conditions...

*<sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

So, she urged her sister to count their blessings – meager as they were,  
and they found that they actually had some blessings for which to be thankful.  
Corrie was half-heartedly agreeing with her sister,  
but she couldn't quite agree with thanking God for fleas!  
However... they later learned that the reason why they were able  
to hold their evening Bible study without getting caught,  
was because of the fleas that were everywhere in the barracks...  
The guards were unwilling to go inside their barracks at night!  
Therefore, they could even find gratitude for fleas...

Betsie was a consistent and steadfast voice that sustained her sister –  
until Corrie was finally released – though, Betsie herself would die at the camp.  
<http://www.vancechristie.com/2016/11/22/giving-thanks-circumstances-corrie-ten-boom/>

Betsie ten Boom has provided an important example for all people as to how to  
intentionally live up to Paul's challenge to *give thanks in all circumstances*.  
A person who provided me with a way to see this intentional thanksgiving in action  
was Garrett Wilson, a full-blooded Dakota "Sioux" Indian and  
wounded combat veteran of the Korean War.  
He was also a member of All Nations Church in Minneapolis,  
affiliated with the United Church of Christ;  
and active with the UCC Council of American Indian Ministries.  
He called me 'Koda' which means, "Beloved Friend" and that's how I call him.

During the summer of 2000, I had just accepted the position of pastor  
at Holiday UCC in Florida, and was driving out to Washington state  
to volunteer at the Grunewald Guild.

I stopped over in Minneapolis to visit Garrett & his wife Lynne  
and while I was there I got an e-mail message from my folks,  
asking me not to take a chance on that car of mine,  
but to get back to Florida and get settled there.

I told this to my friend and he asked me,  
"Do they still need you out there in Washington?"

So, I called and they said, "We need you!"  
So now, I had to go.

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On the day that I was to leave,  
Garrett took some Half & Half pipe tobacco and gave some to me,  
then I followed him around my car, sprinkling tobacco as we went –  
even up into the wheel wells.

He said to me that using tobacco this way was a thank offering;  
and he would often mix tobacco with a bit a food and just drop it anywhere.  
This was from his Native American tradition – something he reclaimed as an adult,  
after being discouraged as a youth while growing up in a boarding school  
that prevented him from speaking the Dakota language  
as well as observing such cultural practices.

I have understood this ritual as being a kind of active prayer –  
a way of being in dialogue with God.

It was not to be understood as some kind of payment in return for good fortune,  
but rather served as a way of saying thanks for help received in the past  
and for help that will surely come for the road ahead.

I traveled 30,000 miles that year, so I jokingly say  
the blessing is good for at least that far.

With Garrett being UCC, I figured I could add ‘tobacco blessings’  
to my repertoire as an ordained UCC minister!

This congregation UCC at The Villages, did such a tobacco blessing  
for my Honda CRV before I left on my sabbatical this summer,  
using Half & Half tobacco, sprinkling around my car  
and even up into the wheel wells.

I drove 5,500 miles and had two flat tires at the beginning and the end  
of that road trip:

the driver side rear tire

which I discovered in the hotel parking lot as I checked out

after the UCC General Synod conference in Baltimore; and

the passenger side rear tire

which an Autotrain attendant pointed out upon my return to Florida.

Now mind you, I had to change the tires myself,

but both times took place off the road – so the blessing was still in effect.

Like the Apostle Paul said – and as Betsie ten Boom put into practice:

“Give thanks in all circumstances”,

and like Koda Garrett Wilson taught me to

give thanks for help received in the past

and for help that will surely come for the way ahead,

in this way, we can live intentionally without taking our blessings for granted.

Amen

*1 Thessalonians 5:1-20*

<sup>1</sup>But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. <sup>4</sup>But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup>For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. <sup>6</sup>So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. <sup>7</sup>For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. <sup>8</sup>But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup>For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup>who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. <sup>11</sup>Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

<sup>12</sup>But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup>and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup>And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. <sup>15</sup>See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray constantly, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit, <sup>20</sup>do not despise prophesying, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast what is good, <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup>May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

<sup>25</sup>Brethren, pray for us.

<sup>26</sup>Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

<sup>27</sup>I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren.

<sup>28</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Corrie and Betsie ten Boom were courageous, compassionate Dutch Christians who helped harbor Jews from the Nazis in Holland during World War 2. After the sisters were arrested for doing so, they were imprisoned at Ravensbruck, a German concentration camp.

In their barracks, they were shown to a series of massive square platforms, stacked three levels high and placed so close together that people had to walk single-file to pass between them. Rancid straw was scattered over the platforms, which served as communal beds for hundreds of women. Corrie and Betsie found they could not sit upright on their own platform without hitting their heads on the deck above them. They lay back, struggling against nausea that swept over them from the reeking straw.

Suddenly Corrie started up, striking her head on the cross-slats above. Something had bitten her leg. "Fleas!" she cried. "Betsie, the place is swarming with them!" Descending from the platform and edging down a narrow aisle, they made their way to a patch of light. "Here! And here another one!" Corrie wailed. "Betsie, how can we live in such a place?"



*Womens' Barracks in a German Concentration Camp*

"Show us. Show us how," Betsie said matter-of-factly. It took Corrie a moment to realize that her sister was praying. "Corrie!" Betsie then exclaimed excitedly. "He's given us the answer! Before we asked, as He always does! In the Bible this morning. Where was it? Read that part again!"

Corrie checked to make sure no guards were nearby, then drew from a pouch a small Bible she had managed to smuggle into the concentration camp. "It was in First Thessalonians," she said, finding the passage in the feeble light. "Here it is: 'Comfort the frightened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus ...'" (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18).



*Betsie ten Boom*

“That’s it!” Betsie interrupted. “That’s His answer. ‘Give thanks in all circumstances!’ That’s what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this barracks!”

Corrie stared at her incredulously, then around at the dark, foul-smelling room. “Such as?” she inquired.

“Such as being assigned here together.”

Corrie bit her lip. “Oh yes, Lord Jesus!”

“Such as what you’re holding in your hands.”

Corrie looked down at the Bible. “Yes! Thank You, dear Lord, that there was no inspection when we entered here! Thank You for all the women, here in this room, who will meet You in these pages.”

“Yes,” agreed Betsie. “Thank You for the very crowding here. Since we’re packed so close, that many more will hear!” She looked at her sister expectantly and prodded, “Corrie!”

“Oh, all right. Thank You for the jammed, crammed, stuffed, packed, suffocating crowds.”

“Thank you,” Betsie continued on serenely, “for the fleas and for ...”

That was too much for Corrie. She cut in on her sister: “Betsie, there’s no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.”

“ ‘Give thanks in *all* circumstances,” Betsie corrected. “It doesn’t say, ‘in pleasant circumstances.’ Fleas are part of this place where God has put us.” So they stood between the stacks of bunks and gave thanks for fleas, though on that occasion Corrie thought Betsie was surely wrong.

As the weeks passed, Betsie’s health weakened to the point that, rather than needing to go out on work duty each day, she was permitted to remain in the barracks and knit socks together with other seriously-ill prisoners.

She was a lightning fast knitter and usually had her daily sock quota completed by noon. As a result, she had hours each day she could spend moving from platform to platform reading the Bible to fellow prisoners. She was able to do this undetected as the guards never seemed to venture far into the barracks.

One evening when Corrie arrived back at the barracks Betsie's eyes were twinkling. "You're looking extraordinarily pleased with yourself," Corrie told her.

"You know we've never understood why we had so much freedom in the big room," Betsie said, referring to the part of the barracks where the sleeping platforms were. "Well—I've found out. This afternoon there was confusion in my knitting group about sock sizes, so we asked the supervisor to come and settle it. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't step through the door and neither would the guards. And you know why?" Betsie could not keep the triumph from her voice as she exclaimed, "Because of the fleas! That's what she said: 'That place is crawling with fleas!'"

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