

2017 Thanksgiving sermon

Connie began our worship time today by focusing our attention on one of the Hebrew words for thanksgiving; **Towdah** which carries with it the idea of **the extension of one's hand**.

And I really like the picture that creates in our minds as we consider the concept of thanksgiving because it visually focuses our attention on what or who we're reaching out for rather than what our current circumstances are. And sometimes that's really important because the present circumstances may not easily elicit expressions of thanksgiving.

An excellent example of Towdah would be what Marquis Goodwin, wide-receiver for the San Francisco 49ers, did last Sunday. He helped his team win their first game of the season by scoring a touchdown. As he prepared to enter the end zone he extended his hand toward God in heaven and then in the end zone he quickly dropped to his knee in prayer. Lots of players through the years have done similar actions but for Marquis these gestures carried far more emotion and significance. In the post-game press conference, Marquis explained his actions and revealed that earlier that morning he had been at his wife's side as she gave birth to their still born son. Their hearts were crushed and he considered not playing a few hours later in the game but his wife encouraged him to play. He also explained that his gestures toward heaven and kneeling in prayer were thanking God for helping him to accomplish this but also as a gesture of him and his wife's deep faith in God – through everything, even the death of their new born son. He stated that they both still believe and trust in God and that He will walk and love them through this tragedy and will use their lives and this public platform to declare His goodness in and through all things. That's a great demonstration of Towdah – reaching your hand out to God and thanking God in advance for His goodness and love.

I think author **Vaneetha Risner** expressed this sentiment that many of us feel at times. She wrote about thanksgiving: *"I know I should count my blessings, but sometimes it's just easier to count my miseries. That comes more naturally. And miseries capture my thoughts and interrupt my days more readily than blessings. But counting my miseries seems to shrink my soul, and in the end I am more miserable than when I began. Counting my blessings may be arduous at first, an act of taxing obedience rather than an overflow of joy; but in the end it opens up space in my heart. And when I choose to face my miseries directly and find blessings in them, something miraculous happens. I view all of life differently. I see my circumstances through a lens of faith. And I am able to declare with confidence that, even in the worst of circumstances, God is still good and there is much to be thankful for."* Can anyone here relate to Vaneetha's struggles?

Perhaps, without knowing it, Vaneetha, has discovered the meaning of Towdah. That in the midst of life's challenges and heartaches, we can still give thanks by focusing on the **character of God** rather than on **our circumstances**.

You see that very same approach throughout the Scriptures. Many times in the psalms, David calls out to God, lamenting the constant oppression he's experiencing in running from his enemies and hiding out in caves. But in the end he commits to praising and thanking God for His goodness and faithfulness. Psalm 56 is one such example.

Psalms 56:1-2 (NIV) *Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit; all day long they press their attack. 2 My adversaries pursue me all day long; in their pride many are attacking me.*

And throughout the remainder of the psalm he continues to talk about how these men are always attacking him and wanting to kill him. But as Connie mentioned at the beginning of our service he ends by committing to praising God.

Psalms 56:12-13 (NIV) *I am under vows to you, my God; I will present my thank offerings to you. For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.*

And yet if you look at the title at the beginning of his psalm you'll realize that David wrote this during a time he was captured and being held by the Philistines. God hadn't delivered him from this situation yet – and maybe you're still struggling with things in your life that you've yet to experience God's deliverance – and yet like David, you could still choose to praise God for who He is and what He will be doing in your life.

You see this same approach in Psalm 69. It begins with this call for help:

Psalms 69:1-3 (NIV) *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.*

And for the next 28 verses David calls out to God for rescue from his many enemies. And yet a remarkable switch happens in verse 30 where David says,

Psalms 69:30 (NIV) *I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving.*

Note: David has not experienced God's final deliverance from his enemies when he writes this. And yet, He continues to praise God and thank Him.

This is when you extend your hand or both hands up to God and thank Him for who He is and trusting in His faithfulness and goodness prior to His many gifts or deliverance.

Psalm 136 begins with this call to give thanks to God.

Psalms 136:1-4 (NIV) *Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.*

2 Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever.

3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever. 4 to him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever.

What are we being called to give thanks to God for? *His enduring love.*

And for the remainder of this psalm, (a total of 26 times) "*His love endures forever*" is repeated. The psalm ends with: *Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever.*

You see that thanksgiving of trust in God, in advance of God's actions, expressed in the life of **Jehoshaphat, King of Israel.**

He got word that the huge and powerful armies of the Moabites and Ammonites were coming to wage war against the much smaller Israelite army. Jehoshaphat and all Israelites became quite afraid and knew they were no match for them. So the king led the nation to turn to the Lord in prayer and fasting. And God told them:

2 Chronicles 20:15 (NIV) *'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.* and then God told them to just go out tomorrow and watch what the Lord is going to do. In response to that this is what Jehoshaphat did:

"Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: "Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever." (2 Chronicles 20:21) And the text says that as they began to worship and thank God, He began to wage war against these massive armies until they were all wiped out.

It's an amazing historical account. But what I think is significant is that the Israelites weren't praising God for past deliveries but they praised God for his faithful and enduring love.

It was a fascinating study to read through all the examples of "thanksgiving" in the Scripture. There are a lot of them and often they are for very specific things that the Lord has done for people. And that's certainly very appropriate. A popular Thanksgiving tradition that I've participated in many times is to put a kernel of corn on everyone's plate and then each person goes around and shares something that they are thankful. And it's so good and encouraging to hear people express sentiments of thankfulness. But what if you've had a really tough year and you find yourself more overwhelmed with a sense of loss rather than giftedness. What do you express thankfulness for then? That takes us back to the quote from **Vaneetha Risner** I referred to earlier: "***I know I should count my blessings, but sometimes it's just easier to count my miseries.***"

And yet, it seems from Scripture, living lives of gratitude is not optional.

Colossians 3:17 (NIV) *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Ephesians 5:20 (NIV) *"(NIV) "Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV) *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

Giving thanks **sometimes** is apparently not an option.

And yet, life is sometimes not gratitude producing. So, then what do you do? Do you just try to crank out expressions of things you could be grateful for? Just fake it.

Based on the Scriptures I’ve already presented I’d like to suggest a different more doable model for living a life of thanksgiving. And that’s allowing our thanksgiving to **not** primarily flow out of things we’ve received: a new car, health, wonderful family, etc. But rather that a life of thanksgiving ought to flow out of a focus on the nature and character of God. And not necessarily on how God’s blessed your life but on who God is, the character of God. And allow the circumstances in your life to flow into thanking God for His character.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

- Some of you have **undergone surgery** this past year: *“Thank you God that you are the great healer and physician and that one day you’ll heal my body completely.”*
- Perhaps **a loved one passed away** – *“Thank you God for that you are eternal and that because of Jesus Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, that we don’t have to fear death but that we have hope beyond the grave.”*
- Perhaps you’ve **felt lonely and forgotten** this past year: *Thank you God that you promise to never leave me or forsake me and that nothing can separate me from your love – ever.”*
- Maybe you’ve experienced some **personal healing and rebuilding of relationships** within your family – *“Thank you God that you live in community and relationships matter greatly to you and that you are all about rebuilding broken relationships between us and you and between people. Thank you that you have brought healing into our family.”*
- Perhaps you’ve been **struggling with patience**: *Thank God that He has been so patient with you that He has already placed His character inside of you. Therefore, by extension, you are already a patient person. Thank God for that gift of patience and thank Him that he is already in the process of developing the display of His patience in and through you.*
- Perhaps you’re **looking for a new home to live in** – *thank God that you already have a reservation in heaven for your permanent home.*
- Perhaps you’re **living in fear** because of the violence in our society or even in churches recently: then **claim the promise of 2 Timothy 1:7** where it says that *God did not give us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.”* *Therefore God I thank you that this is who I am and that I don’t have to live in fear. Help me Lord to learn to live out of that identity and not the identity the world is trying to mold me into.*

You see this way, you could always give thanks to God, as Paul instructed, because God never changes, unlike our lives and society. So, it’s always possible to reach out our arms to Him and thank Him for His character and for what He’s currently doing in your life and what He’s going to do in your life.

One last thought: several years ago, Jonathan Edwards pointed out that if we only thank God for His many gifts then we’re bordering on idolatry because it’s possible we only appreciate God for what He can or does for us and not for who He is. If you’re only thankful to God for His gifts then those gifts have become your god and God is merely the deliverer of those gifts. And if you don’t see God continuing to deliver then you’ll turn away from God and try to acquire those gifts on your own. We

need to seek and love God, not because of what He can give us, but because of who He is. That's true Towdah thanksgiving. Let's strive to for that together.