

Scripture Lesson: I Thessalonians 5:12-28

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 193

¹² But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³ esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵ See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil. ²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ²⁵ Brothers and sisters, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers and sisters. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Video Clip: *Happiness for Beginners: Studying Happiness* (44:22-46:30)

I Thessalonians 5:12-28

08/09/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“HFB1: Appreciate Everything”

Rev. Amy Terhune

For the next few weeks, (with a one week ‘time out’ on August 30 for the youth to share about their mission trip), I’m going to use the book "Happiness For Beginners" by Katherine Center, using short clips from the subsequent movie release of the same name that came out a few years back on Netflix starring Ellie Kemper and Luke Grimes. If you've never read the book or seen the movie, that's okay. It's a launching point for the sermon, but as always, the sermons will focus primarily on sharing the Word of God. If you want to watch it, I have a copy, and I think we'll probably show it here at some point after VBS ends.

But a little background is in order. *Happiness for Beginners* tells the story of Helen Carpenter who, recovering from a divorce, decides to go on an intense wilderness hike in order to challenge herself to step outside of her comfort zone and find her own spirit again. She wants to manufacture an experience that will heal her, but from day one, it is clear that things are beyond of her control. Her brother's best friend Jake is on the trip, and he represents her old life and all that she's trying to put behind her. Already into her 30s, she's also older than most of the others on the trip, and she feels out of place and bit crazy for tackling something so foreign to her experience. But she does begin to discover that the secret to happiness isn't having all your dreams come true, but seeking a spirit of gratitude and connection with others even when life is far less than perfect. Both the book and the movie explore themes of gratitude, forgiveness, wholeness, meaningful human connection, the role of human agency, and what makes for true joy. Spoiler alert: Happiness is not something we find “out there”. Joy is something we cultivate deep within. It's an attitude and it's a choice. Each of us chooses what to focus on and where to spend our energies.

One other side note before moving on: I've been using the terms joy and happiness interchangeably, but they don't actually mean the same thing theologically. Happiness is a temporary, outward emotion that reacts to positive external stimuli whereas joy is a deeper, lasting internal state of being tied to purpose and meaning that can persist even through hard times. The term happy only appears in scripture about 2 dozen times. But joy shows up in scripture hundreds of times, and is counted by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 when he writes that the fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Joy is a spiritual gift. Joy can share space with other emotions, such as sadness and fear. But happiness can't. If we choose joy, it can transform our difficult times into blessings and our heartache into gratitude. [adapted from <https://www.compassion.com/blog/difference-between-joy-and-happiness/>]. *Happiness for Beginners* is misnamed. It's really about that deeper kind of transformative joy. But ever since good ol' Thomas Jefferson used "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence all those years ago, Americans have tended to focus on happiness without comprehending the deeper theological truths involved. So I'm going to use the terms interchangeably, but I'm talking about the deep joy; the transformative joy that comes from the Spirit of God.

When I turn to the lesson from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, it doesn't immediately look like a recipe for joy. It's the final words of a letter to a persecuted people. Thessalonica, known today as Thessaloniki, is the 2nd largest city in modern day Greece. Located in the Macedonian region of Greece, it's one of the main seaports of southeastern Europe. It lies on the Chalcidice peninsula at the head of the Gulf of Salonika, in the foothills of Mount Khortiátis. In the 1st century, it was loyal to the Roman emperor, and as such, it enjoyed it's freedom. Unlike Jerusalem, Thessalonica controlled its own government and was not taxed to the extent that conquered cities were. It was a cosmopolitan city on the Ignatian Way Trade Route, so it was wealthy. It was also a cultic center, with temples to Jupiter, Dionysus, Juno, Isis, Serapis, Minerva, and other Roman deities. Now keep in mind that back then, in Roman culture, one could have a favorite deity and still worship all the others without any conflict or pains of conscious. One would go to the feast days and rituals of all these different Roman deities. In fact, it was expected. This is how the city maintained its favor from Rome.

But when Paul shows up there, preaches the gospel, and begins to build a fledgling church in Thessalonica, now there's a problem because Christians don't mingle. A Christian bows to Jesus Christ and no other. A Christian doesn't go to the feast days and rituals of other gods, nor does one offer tributes or offerings to these other gods. As a result, Christians in Thessalonica faced some of the worst persecution in the Roman world. They have more than their share of martyrs from the first three centuries of the church's existence. Becoming Christian costs followers their families, their status, maybe their business, and quite possibly their life. Christians in Thessalonica were burned and flayed and fed to the lions and drawn & quartered, and all sorts of other horrible things.

This is the community to whom Paul is writing; to whom Paul is promising that another reality exists hidden behind the one that we all see – a Kingdom that is not yet. Paul shapes this church into brothers and sisters who care for one another in the place of the families that have cast them out. He shows them how the Spirit makes them family. And in spite of all they suffer, he writes: "see that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Give thanks in all circumstances? Really? No qualifications on that, Paul? Maybe you should write: give thanks in all circumstances except when you're being burned or flayed or fed to the lions or drawn & quartered. I mean, that seems reasonable to me. The truth is that many of us would have a hard time rejoicing for years of parental abuse, for miscarriages, betrayals, fatal accidents, or wretched diseases.

But Paul doesn't qualify it. Give thanks in all circumstances, he says. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.

In the book *Happiness for Beginners*, Helen has a conversation with fellow hiker Windy. You saw a small clip of that which was included in the movie. Instead of studying messed up people, Windy is studying what happy, well-adjusted people do right. Appreciate Everything is Windy's version of give thanks in all circumstances. But she explains it with biology.

"So, the *pleasure* system," Windy was saying, "is modulated by neurotransmitters called opioids. They help us enjoy the good things in our lives and tune out discomfort. But the system of *desire* is governed by dopamine, which makes you antsy and itchy with longing."

"So, they kind of cancel each other out," Jake said, following her thinking closely.

"That's right. When desire is high, pleasure and satisfaction are low. They're, like, at opposite ends of a seesaw."

I had no idea what they were even talking about, but I heard myself jump in, anyway. "Is that why some people only want what they can't have? Because they confuse pleasure for desire?"

"Yes," Windy called up. "Probably. It always seems to come back to neurotransmitters... People can get hooked on longing, though. They wind up liking the wanting more than the having."

"Exactly," I said. "Is that fixable?"

Windy thought about that before answering. "Well," she said, "there's a lot more neurological plasticity in the brain than we used to believe. In theory, anything's possible. But that's in theory. The most important thing to remember is that getting what you want doesn't make you happy."

"It doesn't?" I asked.

"Not for long. Happiness is much more about appreciation than acquisition."

"Oh," I said. That stumped me a little. I'd always assumed that getting what you wanted was the *definition* of being happy. [10 ¶s from *Happiness for Beginners* by Katherine Center, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015) Ch. 11, pg. 136.]

But it's not. Getting what you want may produce joy if we continue to appreciate it as a gift. But most of us lose our appreciation. There's an old story about a young couple who move into a new home shortly after being married. Wanting to get in good with her neighbors, the young bride bakes a pie for the elderly woman next door. When she presents it that first time, old Mrs. Smith brightens up. "Oh, my dear, how thoughtful of you! What a wonderful, delightful surprise! Thank you so very much!" Touched by the woman's obvious happiness, the young bride bakes her another pie the next week. "Oh, thank you dear, how very sweet!" says her new neighbor. The next week, she bakes another. "Oh, thank you, dear," says her neighbor. The fourth week, when she shows up with yet another pie, old Mrs. Smith offers a starchy smile. "Thank you. Just so you know, your last one was a little blackened on the bottom. You should probably move your oven rack up a notch, so it doesn't burn again." Our young bride isn't sure what to do with that information, and her enthusiasm for baking is dropping off markedly. The next week, she finally lands a job and heads off to work, only to hear Mrs. Smith calling from the front porch one day, "Hey, where's my pie?" How easy it is to forget that the gifts and blessings we enjoy are neither earned nor merited. They are the generous gifts of a loving God. It's all about perspective. When we take time to appreciate the good things in life, we recognize that life is precious and blessings are all around us.

Human beings have incredible power. Not to change the weather or the course of history or the laws of nature. But we do have power over our minds. That is one of God's greatest gifts. Paul says as much as he closes out his first letter to the Thessalonians. "Test everything and hold fast to what is good," he says, which is Paul's way of telling you to use the power you've given. Paul didn't know about neurotransmitters and neurochemicals, but he did understand that gratitude was a discipline; that we

could train ourselves to see good, to find hope, to trust others, to live compassionately, even in the most horrendous of circumstances. But we have to practice. So I encourage you to make a practice of naming good things in your life. Perhaps this is also why Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. This, too, is a discipline we cultivate. If prayer – not merely talking to God, but communing with God – becomes our practice, we take on the mind of Christ; a mind focused on living in God’s presence, rejoicing in God’s goodness all around us, seeing the blessings even in the hardest moments. When I look back, the greatest disappointments I have are those times I failed to see a chance to do good because I’d lost sight of what mattered. I wasn’t tune in to the prompting of the Spirit that comes from prayer. Failing to start laundry for a roommate needing to travel home for a sudden death. Failing to pray with a couple in the waiting room at the hospital because I was too focused on my own parishioners. But I keep practicing gratitude, knowing that it breeds sight and compassion and joy. One of the things that Helen Carpenter winds up celebrating is an emergence from numbness. Feeling again, even if it means feeling hurt and sadness, is so much better than the feeling of just shutting down after her divorce. She counts that as healing. Here are her final thoughts in the book:

“Every story has to have a beginning and an end. Looking back, I could have begun it anywhere or lingered on anything. I could have started it on the day I met my ex, for example, and ended it on the day I left him. I could have begun it with the day we lost Nathan, and ended on the day we almost lost my mother. I could have lingered on the sorrows. I could have painted the portrait of a crumbling marriage or a family drowned by grief. It’s all there.

“But that’s not the story I want to tell. Those aren’t the moments in my life I want to dwell on. They happened. They mattered. They left their marks. But the things we remember are what we hold on to, and what we hold on to becomes the story of our lives. We only get one story, and I’m determined to make mine a good one.

“After all, life will hand each one of us our fair share of despair and loss and suffering – and then some. That’s certain. But just as certain: it will also give us slices of chocolate cake, and sunny 72° days, and breezes that rustle the trees. Good things are so easy to overlook, but that doesn’t make them any less there. [3 ¶s from *Happiness for Beginners* by Katherine Center, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2015) epilogue.]

Appreciate everything. Give thanks in all circumstances. I don’t say that to minimize pain or suffering. Those things are real and nothing will change that. But they aren’t the only things. Appreciate everything. Give thanks in all circumstances. This is the key to deeper joy and meaning. Gratitude isn’t just polite. It’s transformative. It’s a gift. It is how God makes us new. Appreciate everything. Give thanks in all circumstances. Not because our circumstances are always good, but because God is. Amen.