

**Life's Many Surprising Gifts**  
[Text -II Thessalonians 2:1-3; 13-17]

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Listen to the exuberant tone that Saint Paul uses in his letter to the Thessalonian Church: “We are glad to use our time thanking God for you, our good friends - so loved by God! Think of it: you are included in God’s plan of redemption.... You are invited to live in the Spirit... May Jesus himself and God our Creator, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart within you, invigorate your work, and enliven your speech!”

Paul’s words certainly reveal an enlivened spirit of joy and thanksgiving! What may surprise you, however, is that Paul’s upbeat attitude about God’s surprising and helpful gifts, arises from his own personal hardships. In his second letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul describes some of these:

“Five times I received from the Jewish authorities thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea...in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from nonbelievers...hungry and thirsty, often cold and exposed to the elements.... *However*, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, and persecution for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It’s difficult to fathom how someone who endures so many dreadful experiences, can remain so remarkably positive. Let’s be honest, sometimes you and I get cranky if our computer crashes, or the driver in front of us is going too slowly. Yet Paul, who endures tremendous struggles and hardships in his efforts to spread the Good News of Christ, *continues* to be pleasantly surprised by God’s good and gracious gifts.

This morning I want to look at how Paul’s relationship with Jesus Christ empowers and inspires him to remain positive and faithful in the good times and the bad; in times of plenty and in times of need - because, let’s face it, as individuals and as a congregation, our lives are made up of good times and bad; times of smooth sailing, and times when nothing seems to go right. Yet in all of our life situations, our relationship with Jesus Christ can also make a profound difference in how you and I handle them. For Paul, there seem to be two fundamental ways in which his connection to Jesus Christ enhances his ability to cope with whatever life brings. The first, is the *example* that Jesus sets for him. The second, is the amazing sense of *community* that Paul experiences as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we see a marvelous example of how fully life can be lived when one trusts in Divine love and abundance. Jesus himself has no home, no property, virtually no material possessions; yet his life is rich and full beyond measure. And remarkably, for one who appears to have nothing, Jesus is able to consistently meet the essential needs of every person he encounters!

Maybe that's because, at the deepest level, what every person truly needs is love and acceptance, forgiveness and inclusion.

In Jesus' mind and heart, there is absolutely no scarcity of these basic qualities; because he recognizes that these qualities are at the heart - and *are* the heart - of the Divine Source of Life. Therefore, Jesus is able to freely convey love, acceptance, and forgiveness, regardless of the circumstances surrounding him. His undying trust in the abundance of Divine grace even allows him to love and forgive those who reject him and seek to take his life. Ultimately he surrenders his life - trusting that even through his *death* - the essence of Divine goodness and blessing will arise and spread and be greatly multiplied.

I think when you and I look at the lives of those who genuinely follow the way of Jesus Christ, we realize that this is true. And when we ourselves respond to life's ups, or downs, with a Christ-like understanding of God's abundant love and grace, we discover that we, too, can do amazing things through Christ who strengthens *us*. And I cannot over-emphasize the importance of that word *us!*

If you or I try to do things on our own, we often come up short. When we try to handle life's many complexities and problems without the support of *community*, we tend to be overwhelmed. Fortunately, you and I don't have to go it alone, because we *are* "us!" As members and friends of Brecksville United Church of Christ - as members of the worldwide Body of Christ - we truly do accomplish many remarkable things that we could never do alone.

Together, we provide food and clothing, help and hospitality for those in need; as well as encouragement, prayer and support for one another in *our* times of need. As a community of faith, we offer opportunities to worship, learn and grow - and occasions to work and play and celebrate. As a church that is open and affirming of all people, we provide an authentic sanctuary for those who society, and even other faith-groups, tend to ignore or push aside. We effectively share our resources to enhance the lives of people locally, and around the world. We also share great food and fellowship right here, today. [Something we'll be doing really soon, if the preacher doesn't get too long-winded!]

So in conclusion.... We truly are people who have been blessed with many surprising gifts:

The gift of Christ's example of Divine love and grace;

The gift of the abundance of life that Jesus shows us and shares with us;

The gift of knowing that the time and talents and energy that we offer, truly makes a positive difference in this world.

And last, but certainly not least, the gift of one another, and this wonderful Faith Community that we share.