

SERMON TITLE: "Thanks in Action"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 16:5-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 20, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I had to go shopping the other day for a greeting card that I should have sent two weeks ago. That negligence got me to thinking how often our actions don't match up to our thoughts, feelings, and words. We're so busy or distracted that we often don't get around to doing the things that we want to do. As I stood there in the store aisle, surrounded by birthday, anniversary, and thank you cards, I decided that our human failure to act as we wish must be why so many greeting cards begin with something like, "I don't say this nearly often enough, but I appreciate you so much."

It's so important to say things like, "I love you," and "I appreciate you." We shouldn't leave such sentiments in any doubt. At Thanksgiving, hopefully we are able to put some words together to thank God and each other for all the good things in our lives. But gratitude is more than spoken words or fancy language printed on a card. True thankfulness will also be backed up by action. So, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, I thought it might be good to take a look at the 16th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In those verses, Paul doesn't ever use the words *Thanksgiving* or *give thanks* or *be thankful*. But Paul is definitely talking about behaviors that convey gratitude. Let's dig into this chapter and learn some ways to put thanks in action.

1—MAKING A VISIT

As we begin in verses five through 12, we see, first of all, that Paul was writing about putting thanks in action by making a visit. That makes a lot of sense when you remember that the Apostle Paul was a missionary who traveled all around the Mediterranean region visiting different cities, starting churches, and then checking back. Visitation was a huge part of what Paul, the itinerant minister, did. Paul was grateful for his salvation through Jesus Christ, and he wanted to share that gospel with others.

Sometime in the past, he had visited the city of Corinth and started the church there. But, by the time he wrote this First Corinthians letter, Paul had moved on and was engaging in ministry 250 miles away in the city of Ephesus.

Apparently there had been some communication by messengers, and Paul had become aware that the Corinthians needed his attention again. That's why he wrote them this lengthy letter, trying to respond to their many questions and concerns. But Paul also knew that, for the fledgling congregation at Corinth, words in a letter wouldn't be enough. The Corinthians needed him to return there and spend some quality time. That's why Paul wrote that, when he would finally arrive for a visit, he might stay the whole winter. He knew that the Christians there needed spiritual guidance. They needed to know that their father in the faith loved them enough to spend time with them face-to-face.

Of course, Paul was a busy man, organizing and managing churches all around the Mediterranean, and he couldn't be everywhere at once. In verses eight and nine, Paul wrote that he had to stay there in Ephesus for a while longer because he was doing effective work and because there was some opposition that he needed to counteract. So, Paul did the next best thing. He sent this letter by messengers, and he tried to get some of his key helpers to go in his place. In verse 10, Paul mentions that Timothy might visit the Corinthians. In verse 12, Paul indicates that he had also "strongly urged" Apollos to visit them. Apollos couldn't make it right now, but he would go later, when he had the opportunity. Even though Paul's message might seem like just words on paper at this point, his promise would be put in action. As soon as possible, someone would be making a visit.

At Thanksgiving, many of us also put our thanks in action by making a visit to family and friends. We go to them or they come to us, and we make an effort to spend some quality time together. If we can't be in each other's physical presence, we show our thanks for our family and friends by picking up the phone or connecting by Skype, Google Hangouts, or iPhone Facetime. That's our way of expressing our appreciation to our parents, our siblings, our kids, and our grandkids for what they mean to us. We

want to thank them for being part of our life, and so we don't just think, feel, or pray about that gratitude. We put our thanks in action by making a visit.

2—ENACTING LOVE, NOT FEAR

Of course, whether we're the host or the guest, when we engage ourselves in Thanksgiving visits, there are some good guidelines to follow. In this 16th chapter, Paul suggests that thanks in action should be characterized by enacting love, not fear. In verse 10, Paul told the Corinthians that, "If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you." In verse 11, Paul wrote that the Corinthians should "let no one despise him." Then, in verse 14, Paul wrote that the Corinthians should do everything in love.

For many of us, holiday visits with family and old friends can be a scary business. Even though we have much in common, we also have some very different perspectives. If we had any doubt about that, the recent election has proven to us once again how members of the very same family, people from the very same hometown, alumni from the very same school, and people from the very same church can be diametrically opposed on certain issues.

So, we should absorb some wisdom from Paul before we head to our Thanksgiving tables. Before we get into a knock-down drag-out battle with cousin Pete, Aunt Alice, or brother Bob, maybe it would be good to review this principle. Before we lambast the other political party, say something offensive about granddaughter Gretchen's tattoo, or make an unkind remark about nephew Kyle's husband Sam, we should think about other people's feelings. Thanks in action should demonstrate and evoke love, not fear. No matter how absurd our relatives' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors may seem to us, there is no reason to intimidate, pressure, put down, ridicule, bully, belittle, or despise.

Physical and emotional safety should be high priorities at our holiday gatherings. And I mean that for us, too. If someone else at the visit is acting like a bully toward us, then we might have to take measures to protect ourselves. You might have noticed that, in verses 19 and 20, Paul wrote about

warm greetings and holy kisses—which makes me think of a picture on the front page of Tuesday’s *Standard Examiner*. West Bountiful Elementary School Principal Regina Oechsle (ook-slay) was kissing a piglet on the snout as a way to motivate her students to read and reward them for exceeding their book and chapter goals. Despite the fact that she was locking lips with a barnyard animal, that school-morale-boosting act of motivation was absolutely a holy kiss. But the fact is that some greetings aren’t warm and some kisses aren’t holy—even in families. We need to know the difference and make sure our kids do too. No one should be subjected to abuse of any kind.

The Thanksgiving visit should be a time of peace, not war. It should be a time of trying to listen, to understand, and to appreciate. Our gatherings with family and friends should be zones of safety. Thanksgiving should be a time when we put thanks in action by generating and enacting love, not fear.

3—PUTTING OURSELVES TO SERVICE

Another good guideline for our holiday visits is found in verses 15-18. There Paul indicated that thanks in action involves putting ourselves to service. In verse 15, Paul wrote about the household of Stephanas, who “devoted themselves to the service of the saints.” In verse 16, Paul urged the rest of the Corinthians “to put [themselves] at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them.” In verse 17, Paul expressed gratitude for Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, who had served him by refreshing his spirit with their visit.

At Thanksgiving, there are many ways we can put thanks in action by serving others. We can help with the planning and the inviting. We can help with the grocery shopping. We can help with the advance cleaning, decorating, and table setting. We can help with cooking. We can help with carving the turkey and serving the food. We can help with washing dishes and taking care of leftovers. We can help by playing with the kids. We can help by driving and picking up elderly relatives. We can help with yard work or household repairs. We can help by entertaining guests with our amazing talents. You

name it. Don't wait to be asked. Look around you, pick up the slack, and fill in where needed. There are dozens of ways to set our thanks in action by putting ourselves to service.

CONCLUSION

I began this sermon by saying that nowhere in this 16th chapter do the instructions to "give thanks" or "be thankful" appear. And nowhere here does Paul even say that he is thankful.

What I didn't tell you is that Paul didn't need to say those words in the 16th chapter because he had started out this letter with that idea. In 1 Corinthians 1:4, Paul wrote, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus." From the very beginning of this long letter, everything Paul had expressed was written from a heart of gratitude. He was so glad to have the Corinthians as his offspring in Christian faith. He was so appreciative of how they had accepted the gospel and were trying to live as disciples of Jesus.

It was from that feeling of gratitude that Paul acted to write this letter. His thanks in action would eventually deliver Paul back to Corinth to spend some quality time visiting with those Christians in need of his guidance. In the meantime, however, Paul's gratitude motivated him to ask his assistants Timothy and Apollos to make visits ahead of him. It was from his thankfulness that Paul then instructed the Corinthians to respond to those visits with their own thanks in action. If they were truly thankful, then they should enact love, not fear, and they should put themselves to service.

At Thanksgiving, it's great to take some quiet time to reflect on all our blessings. But giving thanks isn't just about sitting back, being served, and then saying, "Thank you." As Paul shows us, if we're really grateful, we will also put thanks in action.