

# “Nun danket alle Gott”

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 <sup>1</sup>

Some of you are wondering what’s up with the title to this sermon. I don’t usually give sermons titles in non-English languages, but this one is German. (I did take German in college, but it would be hard to prove now!). Some of you will know that this is the German title of the hymn we know as *Now Thank We All Our God*, which will be our Hymn of Commitment this morning.

But even if you knew all that, you may not know the story behind the words to that hymn, which was written by German pastor Martin Rinkart in 1636 or 1637. Pastor Martin served in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648.

Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area where the fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But one abandoned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkart officiated at the funerals of the other two.

As the only pastor left, he often conducted services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day—some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died. By the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services. Yet living in a world dominated by death, Pastor Rinkart wrote the words to *Nun Danket alle Gott* as an expression of undaunted faith in God. It is in the spirit of Pastor Martin that we gather on this Sunday before Thanksgiving to offer our own thanks to God: <sup>2</sup>

*Now thank we all our God  
With hearts and hands and voices;  
Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom this world rejoices.  
Who, from our mother's arms,  
Hath blessed us on our way,  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.*

Pastor Martin’s courageous thanksgiving even in the most difficult of times has many present-day illustrations. Here’s just one:

Some of you know that the Nigerian city of Jos sits on the great fault line between the Muslim north of Nigeria and Nigeria’s Christian south. This means that Christians in Jos are well-acquainted with persecution and with sorrow.

Last year a Baptist church in Jos was attacked by Muslim extremists who burned down both the church building and the house of the church’s pastor, Pastor Sunday Gomna. On the second Sunday after the attack, when the church returned for worship, they gathered in a little mud-walled community center about one kilometer from the burnt church.

Pastor Gomna stood up and offered some beautiful and unexpected words of gratitude. He said, “First, I am grateful that no one in my church killed anyone.” In fact, during the chaos of the

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on November 23, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Now\\_Thank\\_We\\_All\\_Our\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Now_Thank_We_All_Our_God)

attacks, Pastor Sunday had gone around the community and some of the Muslim people said, “Pastor, thank you for the way you taught your people. Your people helped to protect us.”

“Second,” he said, “I am grateful that they did not burn my church.” Everyone looked at Pastor Sunday with disbelief, since their church building had in fact been burned to the ground. But Pastor Sunday continued: “Inasmuch as no church member died during this crisis, they did not burn our church. They only burned *the building*. We can rebuild the building but we could not bring back to life any of our members. So I am grateful that they did not burn my church.”

“Third, I am grateful that they burned my house as well as the church building. If they had burned your house and not my house, how would I have known how to serve you as pastor? However, because they burned my house and all my possessions, I know what you are experiencing and I will be able to be a better pastor to you. So I am grateful that they burned my house as well.”<sup>3</sup>

Pastor Gomna’s courage, grace, and Christlikeness is repeated many times over around our world every single day; but we don’t have to experience tragedy or sorrow in order to be thankful.

Ruben Pardo has been the operator of one of the last manual elevators in Los Angeles, located in an Art Deco office building on Wilshire Boulevard, for thirty-five years. Ruben’s life is simple, but his purpose is clear and his heart is full of joy and gratitude.

Every day young, bright graphic designers, web branders, and search engine optimizers ride Ruben’s ornate elevator to their loft offices. And every day, Pardo cheerfully greets them by name. While young employees come and go, Pardo is a fixture in the building. One young executive said, “He’s been in this elevator longer than I’ve been on the planet.”

Ruben was born in Mexico City, the son of a shop owner. When he was seven, his family immigrated to the States. Through hard work like painting garages, shoveling snow, and operating elevators like the one he still manages, Ruben was able to support himself, and eventually, his wife. Ruben works six days a week and rarely takes paid vacations. Every Sunday, he takes his wife to dinner as a gesture of gratitude, exclaiming, “My wife and I are happy.”

While the young adults in his office building move off to school, get married, and travel the world, Pardo remains steady and constant, doing the same thing he’s done for 35 years. “I love my small, little world,” he says. And yet here’s how Luis Zavala, a 33-year-old Web graphic designer, describes Pardo: “It’s like a glass of fresh water every morning. I don’t know how he does it, but every day for him just seems to be a bright opportunity for something.”<sup>4</sup>

Ruben Pardo is a good example of the reality that most of the life-changing and world-changing things that happen in this world seldom make the evening news. Here’s another example:

In the 1980s, Lee Buono was a student at the Medford Memorial Middle School in Medford, New Jersey. One afternoon he stayed after school to remove the brain and spinal cord from a frog. He did such a good job that his science teacher, Mr. Al Siedlecki, told him he might become a neurosurgeon someday . . . and that’s exactly what Lee Buono did.

Years later, after Dr. Buono told this story to one of his patients, the patient suggested that Dr. Buono call his former teacher who had inspired him and thank him. So he did. Mr. Siedlecki

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark Meynell, “What to say when they burn down your house and church,” Quearentia blog (10-21-13); cited in David Smith, *The Kindness of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Nita Lelyveld, “Elevator operator’s overriding story: Joy,” *Los Angeles Times* (10-15-11).

hadn't heard from Lee since he was in high school.

“I was flabbergasted,” Mr. Siedlecki remembers. “I said, ‘Of all the people in your entire career, you want to thank me?’ It was the same feeling I had when . . . my kids were born. I started to cry. It made me feel really important that I had that influence.”<sup>5</sup>

Anybody like that whom you need to thank? It would do you good. *The Wall Street Journal* noted that “adults who frequently feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not, according to studies conducted over the past decade. They’re also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy, or alcoholics. They earn more money, sleep more soundly, exercise more regularly, and have greater resistance to viral infections.

“Gratitude brings similar benefits in children and adolescents. Kids who feel and act grateful tend to be less materialistic, get better grades, set higher goals, complain of fewer headaches and stomach aches, and feel more satisfied with their friends, families, and schools than those who don’t.

The researchers concluded, “A lot of these findings are things we learned in kindergarten or our grandmothers told us, but now we have scientific evidence to prove them . . . . The key is not to leave it on the Thanksgiving table.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Recalling His Inspiration, a Neurosurgeon Thanks His Teacher,” NPR StoryCorps (12-27-13).

<sup>6</sup> Melinda Beck, “Thank You. No, Thank You,” *The Wall Street Journal* (11-23-10).