

I learned a bad habit while I was in seminary. It still sometimes shows itself.

My first year of seminary, I attended Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina (Yes, I still cheer for the Duke Blue Devils). It was quite the experience for me, being from the Northern Plains to end up down south in North Carolina. The culture was different. The food was different. Even religion was different.

In the Dakota's, like much of Wisconsin, there is this pervasive, Northern European ethic of quietness. You don't talk about money. You don't talk about sex. And you certainly don't talk about religion.

But down south I discovered television preachers. When I would listen to them on TV or on the radio, I was amazed at how many syllables they could give to the simple name of Jesus. "Thank you J-E-Su-sa".

It's kind of fun to do. Do you want to try it with me? Thank you J-E-Su-sa.

Well, my bad habit is that when something went well in my life, I, along with many of my friends, would mock television preachers and start saying, "Thank you J-E-Su-sa".

I don't do it as much anymore. Because I have found that it is just as offensive to other people today, as it was to me when I heard it back then. Even though I did it in a way that was often clearly mocking, I found it disingenuous, when I heard television evangelists doing it. I have come to believe that if we are going to live a life of faith, we have to do it in a way that is real and honest and genuine. Not fake, or put on. Because if it is fake or put on, people will sniff that out in a heart beat and walk away from us.

In our scripture for today, Paul is talking about the importance of living our faith honestly. He knows that life is filled with challenges. He is writing to a church that is undergoing persecution. People have died for the faith.

He is writing to those who remain how to have an attitude that can help us orient our whole life to God, so we can remain grounded when challenges come our way.

Our sermon series is meant to be grounding us in faith, as we get ready for the party of Christmas. When we throw a party, we get our homes ready for company to come. We need to prepare our hearts and minds to get ready for this celebration of Christmas that is upon us.

What helps you to get ready for Christmas? Is it having all of your shopping done? Is it having your house clean? Is it getting to the special services at church? Is it going to special events in the community? Or is it something more?

In our scripture for today, Paul is reminding us that to Orient our whole life to God is a practice. When we practice such things as living with gratitude, taking time to pray, seeing the best in other people; these things help us to open our hearts and lives to others in a way that is real, and honest and genuine.

The difficulty of this time of year is that sometimes we get so stressed, that it is hard to live with gratitude. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever just gotten so caught up in living that you move from task to task to task, and forget all the goodness in life? Paul urges us to live with gratitude and thanksgiving.

Paul urges us to take time to pray. Do you get so busy, running from the moment you wake up until the moment you fall back into bed? Paul urges us to take time to pray. I would urge you to

pause, even for 15 minutes a day for next 11 days leading up to Christmas, to remember to reconnect with God.

Paul urges us to see the best in other people. When we get harried and hectic it is tempting to see other people as a nuisance who get in the way. When we find that other people or their personalities are really getting on our nerves. That is a time to pause, and remember that God wants us to see the best in another person.

There is a movement that is going on in our world right now. It is called the Advent Conspiracy. They have a terrific website. They believe that Christmas can still change the world.

They are urging all of us who follow Christ to do some simple things such as:

- ✚ Worship Fully
- ✚ Spend Less
- ✚ Give more
- ✚ Love all

You will see stories at this website of people who are just approaching life and Christmas differently. The Cole family from Illinois is not exchanging presents with extended family this year. They are getting together at Christmas. They are going to donate money together and buy animals through Heifer Project International.

I recently heard of a lady who saves coins in a jar all year - she even invites her family to throw coins in the jar. Then she gives the whole jar that she has collected to a family in need, anonymously, in early December - so they can have a good Christmas.

Not too long ago, I heard of a church that urged people when they got a gift for a member of the family, to purchase a second gift of the exact same item and give it to someone in need.

I know of a congregation that is inviting members of their church to give \$10 for each family member to the Nothing but Nets campaign to help families in Africa received bed nets so they don't get malaria.

There is so much we can do, to remember that we are connected to each other. Sure some of it costs money. But there are so many things we can do that don't cost money, that help people feel good. And in the process, it just might help people see God living in us and through us.

Are you willing to let God be seen through you? If so, what are you doing this year to live with gratitude? What are you doing to take time to pray? What are you doing to see the best in other people? What are you doing to let God be seen through you?

In a world where there is much anxiety and fakeness, my hope is that we can live with honesty, genuineness and a realness that reflects God's love for us.

Amen