

IN ALL THING GIVE THANKS
I Thessalonians 5: 12-22

Saigon fell on April 30, 1975 bringing an end to the War in Vietnam. A South Vietnamese Protestant minister named Nguyen Cuong Hu could have escaped but instead he chose not to leave his country and abandon the church he was pastoring. He made sure, however, that his wife and children got out. Eventually his family, without him, relocated in Orange County in Southern California. He was arrested immediately by the North Vietnamese Communist authorities once they assumed control of the city. He was detained for several months and told nothing. He fully expected he would be executed soon. In due course, he was sent to a prisoner of war camp with hundreds of fellow South Vietnamese citizens. He would spend the next seven years of his life there.

Cuong Hu is a man of deep and abiding Christian faith. He is very quiet, shy even, and speaks slowly and gently. As time went by and the minutes gave way to hours, then days, then weeks, then months, then years, he says he took away three things from this experience. First, as our scriptural text this morning from I Thessalonians 5:18 states, "Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Second, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in in this life, God has something to teach us, and third, in whatever circumstance this world confronts us with, God has a mission for us to fulfill."

Indeed, Cuong Hu gave thanks to God in every moment and in every circumstance of his seven year ordeal. What God taught him is the lesson of Psalms 73:23, "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand." In other words, God is always with us, God never abandons us, in life and in death, in body and in soul. Fortified and steeped with these two insights then, first, gratitude in his heart, and second, knowing the Holy Spirit was holding his right hand, Cuong Hu was empowered to fulfill his God-given mission in this situation.

That mission turned out to be that hundreds of his fellow South Vietnamese citizens who

were imprisoned alongside him by their Communist captors turned to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In a country that historically is only 8% Christian, a great many more than 8% of the incarcerated inmates became followers of Rev. Nguyen's faith. They saw in this humble and gentle man the peace of God that passes all understanding and the strength of character that allowed him to love those who despised and ridiculed him. Like St. Paul the Apostle in his Thessalonians letter, he encouraged the faint-hearted, helped the weak, was patient with everyone, saw that no one repaid evil for evil, rejoiced always, prayed constantly, and in everything gave thanks to God. I am glad to report that after seven years in 1982, Rev. Nguyen was finally released from prison. He had to sign a document promising he would never return to his native land, and then made his way to America. He was reunited with his family in Orange County and became the President of a Presbyterian-related theological school in Little Saigon in the city of Garden Grove, right next to Disneyland in Anaheim, California.

It is not easy to give thanks to God in all circumstances. As a matter of fact, I believe it is emotionally impossible to FEEL gratitude in our hearts when a tragedy or something terrible happens to us or our loved ones. Nevertheless, we can sincerely and genuinely offer prayers of thanksgiving to God even in the worst of times while hoping things change for the better. This is what I believe St. Paul means when he says to give thanks in all things. Rev. Nguyen Cuong Hu was not feeling thankful to the North Vietnamese Communists for imprisoning him but he was giving thanks to God that he was alive and his family was safe.

Even in the most difficult situations imaginable, God has something to teach us and there is a mission for us to fulfill. One of my favorite movies of all time is The Shawshank Redemption starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. Those of you who have seen it will remember that Tim Robbins' character named Andy Dufresne is falsely accused of murder and is sent to prison for life. He becomes good friends with Morgan Freeman's character named Ellis "Red" Redding. Andy is subjected to unbelievably brutal treatment at the hands of Warden Samuel Norton

although he eventually ends up serving as the warden's office assistant because of his banking skills. There are a number of twists and turns in the plot but Andy eventually escapes from his prison cell because he has been digging a tunnel through the wall with a rock hammer over the course of two decades behind the cover of a Raquel Welch poster. The line I remember most from the movie uttered by Red which is the lesson he learned from Andy and is what God wants to teach us in even the most difficult human circumstances, "Get busy living or get busy dying." The choice is always ours.

The life lesson of both Nguyen Cuong Hu and Andy Dufresne can be summed up in Max Dodd's and my favorite Winston Churchill speech. It consists of nine words. Not long before he passed away at the age of 90 in 1965, he was invited to be the commencement speaker at the prep school he had attended as a boy, Harrow School. When the time came to give his speech, he stood up, went to the podium and spoke nine words, "Never give up, never give up, never give up." The great Winston Churchill then turned around, walked to his seat, and sat down. No one who was there ever forgot what he said that day.

Andy Dufresne practiced long-range planning in fulfilling his mission to escape from Shawshank Penitentiary. He realized "The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step" and for twenty years after the lights were turned off in his prison cell, when everyone else was sleeping in the dark, he painstakingly picked away at the concrete wall with a rock hammer. Ingeniously, every morning during exercise time in the prison yard, he emptied the contents of his pockets down his pant-legs which were filled with the wall grindings he had chipped away every night behind the poster. He never lost faith even when it appeared impossible that he would ever see the light of freedom again. He chose to keep busy living and not get busy dying. He showed us that we may be down but not out, where there's life there's hope, where there's a will there's a way, and above all we must "Never give up, never give up. never give up."

A day doesn't go by when I don't think of my mother. I could not get her out of my mind as I was preparing this sermon. Born in 1898 in the city of Pyongyang in what is now North Korea, Whamok Kim Lee was a pioneering female evangelist who thundered against the triad evil of foreign colonialism, Confucian feudalism, and male chauvinism. The year before now 95 year old Billy Graham was born, my mother preached to masses of non-believers, reaching out to the vast plains of Manchuria spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thousands of hungry souls flocked to hear her stirring sermons under watchful police censors. She refused to yield to bigotry and segregation by crossing the lines, demanding equal rights for women who were at the bottom rung of Confucian serfdom. Long before American and Australian women campaigned for their rights, this pre-feminism feminist waged a marathon crusade, challenging the bedrock male chauvinism within her native Presbyterian denomination.

In her hometown of Pyongyang on fateful March 1, 1919, the Korean 4th of July, when hundreds of thousands of people rose up in demonstrations against their colonialist invaders, my fiery agitator momma led marching columns of young schoolgirls waving forbidden Korean flags and shouting MANSEI — long live independence. For this, like Nguyen Cuong Hu and Andy Dufresne, she was thrown into prison and tortured to get the secrets of the movement out of her. But her interrogators failed in their attempts to extract information from her. Finally, after enduring three months of excruciating pain, she was released by her captors because she convinced them that she was the lone relative left to take care of her sick and frail parents.

For the next 20 years my mother served as a women's evangelist at the oldest and largest Christian church in Pyongyang, the Suhmoonbak Presbyterian Church — a breakthrough in the old Korea. There she urged her flock to exercise patriotism even though a colonial police officer was assigned to censor every sermon she delivered and would yell "Attention!" every time she injected a patriotic message. Even under these trying circumstances, her ministry flourished and over the course of two decades the members of the congregation grew to love and admire

her deeply. In 1939, the church arranged a trip for her to visit America to rejoin my father who had been living there since 1922 during which time he sent money home to help support her and two of my sisters. My mother gave birth to another sister, Sally, in Los Angeles in May of 1940 and I came along in January of 1942. She had not originally planned to stay in the United States but we all know what happened on December 7, 1941. World War II sealed my mother's fate in the USA and she would live out her life as an American citizen until she passed away at the age of 99 in December of 1997.

The biblical verse that most epitomizes what my mother means to me is Psalms 30:5, "Tears may fall in the night but joy comes in the morning." It was from her daily example of how she treated my father, me, and my sisters in all the countless little mundane things of everyday life that I learned on a gut level to "Give thanks to God in all things." Perhaps the greatest lesson she taught me was the true nature and full depth of a mother's love. My parents were married in 1916 and had two daughters, Hehkyung born in 1920 and Aikyung born in 1922. Hehkyung died in Pyongyang in a childhood accident, and Aikyung in a car crash in Los Angeles at the age of 46 in 1968. Several years before my mother passed away in 1997, we were having a conversation and I was interested in finding out what my mother's life was like in North Korea before she went to America in 1939. I had become very curious about our family ancestry and started asking her questions about Hehkyung and Aikyung. Within a few minutes tears began to form in her eyes and I regretted having initiated this discussion. I told her I was sorry and I was going to move on to another subject.

Tenderly she told me, "It's okay, my dear son, I actually appreciate your asking me these questions but please give me a moment to collect myself." I went no further and began talking about something else. I came away with the realization that even though Hehkyung had died almost 70 years before and Aikyung almost 30, my mother was still carrying the wounds of the

loss of her two daughters in the deepest recesses of her heart. St. Paul's words in First Corinthians 13:8 came flooding into my consciousness, "As for prophecies, they shall cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." Love is what never ends. Everything else will pass away. LOVE NEVER ENDS. My mother's love for Hehkyung and Aikyung, for me her only son, and my three living sisters, Kay now 81, Sally now 75, and June now 69, have taught me how to love my wife Susan's and our two children, Jonathan aged 30 and Rebecca 28. They are God's greatest gifts to us and I give thanks for them in any and all circumstances they put us in because that is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. I will love them with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength all the days of my life because of the promise of the Gospel that this love will never end.

Earlier I mentioned the name of Maxwell Dodd. The time has now come to say more about him. Among many things we share in common, he is a man who loved and honored his mother as much as I did mine. Our friendship is the reason I have the great honor and privilege of preaching here today at your historic church in your grand and beautiful city of Sydney. Max and I were both born in 1942, I in January and he in August, which, to be sure, makes me older than him. He takes great pains and experiences much delight, rather unmercifully, in reminding me of this fact at every opportunity. That said, it is the only unmerciful thing about him. Like the aforementioned Vietnamese pastor, Nguyen Cuong Hu, Max is the living embodiment of First Thessalonians 5:14 following: He encourages the faint-hearted, helps the weak, is patient with everyone, sees that no one is repaid evil for evil, rejoices always, prays constantly, and in everything gives thanks to God. The two of us first met on April 20, 1989 in my office in the small Marin County town of San Anselmo on the campus of San Francisco Theological Seminary, an institution I served for 32 years.

Perhaps it was a question of love at first sight but from that day until now for the past quarter of a century we have been in close touch. In the beginning, our communication was via

letters but with the advent of computers we are basically in daily contact with each other. Moreover, over the course of these past 25 years we have managed to see each other in the flesh at least twice annually. I am now fulfilling a long-standing promise I made to him and to myself to visit him on his home turf in this beautiful country of yours. Calvinist that I am, I believe I am predestined, from the foundation of the world, before either Max or I was formed in our respective mother's wombs, to be standing before you on September 13, in the year of our Lord 2015, proclaiming the Gospel According to Maxwell Dodd. I am John the Baptist crying out in this hyper-secularized sociological and cultural wilderness, in which retired Anglican Bishop Bruce Wilson some 32 years earlier penned his famous book, CAN GOD SURVIVE IN AUSTRALIA?. Take heed all of you who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to feel what Max has to say about how to lift this nation out of spiritual malaise. Please stand up, Max, my beloved brother from another mother, and let all who are gathered here take a good look at you. As a personal gift from me, I want all of you to take home a copy of a little book he has written entitled MESSAGE FOR CHAMPIONS. You will be blessed by it, and I am sure you will be led to read and reflect on a number of his many other publications.

Rev. Ross Smith, I realize the general heading of this morning's worship service is "The Narrow Way of Discipleship" based on the Gospel reading in Mark. As a major element in the Gospel According to Maxwell Dodd, this narrow way of discipleship, where many are called but few are chosen, involves the discipline of solitude and silence. In this hectic, busy, and noisy modern world of ours, it is very difficult - for many, a practical impossibility - to take time to be alone by ourselves and quiet the inner voices that constantly chatter to us in our minds. But, as the Bible teaches, "Be still and know that I am God." Finally, the only way, fully and deeply, to experience the reality and presence of God, whence cometh the peace that passeth all understanding, is in solitude and silence. Where is God to be found? The kingdom of God is

within you. In the words of St. Augustine of Hippo in his preamble to prayer addressed to the Almighty, "Thou hast formed us for thyself so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." Sisters and brothers of St. Stephen's Church, God has sent Max Dodd into your midst. He is a precious gift to this congregation and he worships here Sunday by Sunday. As a spiritual mentor, let him guide you to experience the mysteries of God deep within yourselves in solitude and silence. He also has a vision for resurrecting a former program of the social witness of this great church which may well mark the beginning of a renewed sense of vigor and vitality for the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the heart of the city of Sydney.

As I bring this sermon to a close, I importune those of you gathered here this morning to allow me one final impertinent indulgence on my part. Because it was my mother's favorite hymn and I can feel her presence in this hallowed sanctuary at this moment, I am emboldened to sing, "Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee, e'en though it be a cross that raiseth me, still all my song shall be, nearer my God to thee, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee. Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down, darkness be over me, my rest a stone; yet in my dreams I'd be nearer my God to thee; nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee."