

People of the Light: 4. Three Keys to a Meaningful Life
1 Thessalonians 5:12-24
August 14, 2022
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When was the last time you wrote a letter? Admittedly, my Grandma is probably the only person I send letters to regularly – and that isn't as often as it should be either. These days, I hardly even send an email that isn't ministry related! But there's a form and art to writing a good letter, and one part of it – is finding a way to close that both summarizes and encourages the reader. My girlfriends joke that they never open a card I send in front of other people, because I'm bound to make them cry. Now, I don't think that *crying* is always the point of a letter – but I do think, a good letter, uplifts and encourages us through whatever circumstance we find ourselves in.

Today, we've come to the close of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Throughout this letter, Paul has looked to encourage the people to live faithfully, to hold fast to the hope we know in Christ, and to do all of this even in the face of hardships or death. Now, Paul is preparing to sign off... and he does, he offers a few key lessons for living as people of the light. As you'll hear, Paul tells the Thessalonians to: (1) care for each other, (2) pray and rejoice always, and (3) trust the Spirit's presence, clinging to what is good. Read as a whole, it might be challenging to parse out each principle. So, as my favorite nun turned nanny sang once, *let's start at the very beginning... a very good place to start:*

1. Here we go, right at verse 13: The first key principle to a life well lived, isn't about you at all! Paul tells us, that our care for others will be of the most important things we can do to live faithfully as people of the light. Does that feel a little strange to you? That caring for others, comforting the discouraged, helping the weak, being patient – this will bring peace and joy to your life?

It reminded me a bit of an episode of FRIENDS. One of the most popular shows of the late 90s and early oughts, you're likely familiar with these six new yorkers. In this clip you're about to see, we'll watch as two friends, Joey and Phoebe, discuss good deeds. Take a look: Now, I'll leave for you to decide if good deeds are selfless or not. Phoebe spends the rest of the episode trying to prove Joey wrong. She lets a bee sting her, only to realize the bee will die. She gives to a charity she doesn't like, only to find out it still makes her feel happy to do so. And finds out that doing good without *feeling good* is a hard thing.

But here's the good news! God doesn't call us to do good as a sacrifice of self. Instead, God says: doing good, caring for others, will lead to a more joyful and fulfilling life. And it does so, because we're following the commandments of Jesus to *love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.*

This week, around 30 kids came together for Arts Camp. On Friday, they had a quick program – sharing the music they learned. One of the songs, *They'll Know we are Christians* – reminds us that it is by our love, by our actions, that our faith is known in the world. Watching these kids sing gave me such a hope in our future. We're in good hands with these kids, whose love and actions can transform the world.

And it's what Paul is speaking about here, too. We will fall more in love with God and our neighbor when we help those in need. When we comfort those who are discouraged, when we help those who are weak, when we pursue the good in every situation. When we embody the

gifts God shows us, to others. We, in turn will be blessed with greater joy and a sense of peace. Because this is the life to which we are called. Not to act out of obligation, not to receive only what we deserve... but to celebrate and to share the grace of God we know through Christ with a world in need.

2. Paul tells us a little more about what this looks like as we move into verse 16 and hear the second key principle to a fulfilling and faithful life: They almost sound like the instructions I might give my kids before dropping them off: listen, be kind, have fun! Except here, Paul says: Rejoice, pray, and give thanks. Now what area of our life can't be improved by practicing these three things? Joy. Prayer. Gratitude. Relationships with a work colleague? Your marriage? How about driving in rush hour? Yea. I don't think there is a single area of life that isn't improved by finding joy, prayer, and gratitude in all things.

The trick then, I suppose, is actually finding them. But here's the thing – these are not treasures to uncover, as a secret clue to a happy life. Instead, they are practices, that are ongoing. They are the lens in which we view the world. The intentional ways we choose to see joy, give thanks, and pray always. But they lead to a fulfilling life because taking this position forces us to recognize that all of life comes, not from our own doing, but from God. And so, in that way, it is also a position of worship – naming what is God's, *and* what comes from God. And naming the gifts we receive, in all circumstances. Now, you'll notice that this is not a commandment. God commands us to love God and love our neighbor. These are the greatest laws, that give focus and a foundation to all of our living. But this is a lesson directly related to loving God and neighbor. It is a position in life that will allow us to more easily and fully follow God's commandments.

Paul knows that by inviting us to practice joy, gratitude, and prayer – as a spiritual practice -- helps us recognize the gifts of God *already* present in our lives... regardless of our actions or worthiness. The big, theological word for this is **prevenient grace**. That is, the grace of God that goes before all things, surrounds all things, and is in all things. It is the grace and love of God that is given you without question, or worth, or deserving.

It's the love God feels for you, just because you are you.
It's the fullness in your heart a parent feels, seeing that first ultrasound.
It's the knowing in your bones, that you're not alone – because your sister. Your friend.
Your spouse has you. Sees you. Knows you.

Practicing joy, gratitude, and prayer is *naming the prevenient grace of God already at work in your life*. And, the more we practice? The more we see. It works like this... when was the last time you bought a car? The first car I bought entirely on my own, without any advice from my Dad or recommendations from one of my Uncles, was a Nissan Altima. I loved that car. The second I sat in it and took the test drive – I *knew* this was the one I wanted. Nervous as I was to do this alone, I was also invigorated and excited. Push button start. A beautiful grey with a slight sparkle. Spacious leg room. And pretty good gas mileage, which I needed to help me visit this handsome pastor I was dating at the time. *And good thing too, as we soon were married!*

I felt like the queen of the road. You know that feeling? And do you remember what happens next? Looking around and realizing *everyone else* is driving this same car! No matter where you go, grey altimas are everywhere! Turns out you bought the most popular car on the road! Practicing joy, prayer, and gratitude is a little this way. Once you start, you begin to notice it everywhere. And really, that's precisely the point. Because God is with us, not only in the obvious good days of life. But, the promises of Jesus, are that we have a touchable, accessible,

embodied God that knows deeply the pains, grief, isolation, and worries of life. The promise then, is that there is *no place* you can go, that God has not already been. There is no place you can go, that God isn't *already* there waiting with you. And once you begin that daily practice of joy and gratitude in prayer? You'll begin seeing God more clearly there, too.

Ann Lamott is a writer who has a way of being vulnerable and funny with really important topics. The first book I read of hers, was a memoir on parenting called, *Operating Instructions*. I read it when Calvin, my oldest, was a baby... and I laughed. I probably cried. And I definitely felt like someone else understood the excruciating joy of parenthood. In more recent years, she has written books on faith and life. One of them, "*Help, Thanks, Wow*" looks at three simple prayers that will help anyone navigate the everyday struggles of ordinary life. She says, that asking God for help, thanking God, and being in awe of God's work among us are three keys to prayer and life. Sounds a bit like she took a page from Paul's letter doesn't it? In her book, Lamott writes,

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. This key principle reminds us that we *start* in a position of joy, prayer, and gratitude. And the rest will follow.

Some of you will remember or know the challenges of getting out of the door with little kids. It never seems to fail – someone is suddenly thirsty, someone lost a shoe, someone needs the bathroom. Five seconds ago, everyone was playing and fully satisfied. But now, when keys are in hand and it's time to go? Everyone has an immediate need. And for none of them, except me, is that need getting out the door! I am not always my best self in the out-the-door-hustle. But, I've taken to starting these days as Paul suggests: rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. What it looks like is this... instead of feeling frustrated that my kids are never ready, despite my warnings and pleas.

I say: thank you God, for hungry boys and plenty of food in our pantry. Or, wow, God! What a gift that my boys love to play with each other so much, they struggle to leave. Or even, thank you God, that there are still plenty of hours left in the day for which we can rest and play or be productive. Help me to be present to this one. I'm by no means perfect, and have plenty of space for growth. But this small turn, has changed my mornings from being reactive and frustrated, to nestled in a foundation of prayer and joy.

I want to share this conversation between Anne Lamott and Oprah, as they discuss some of this same thing. *We're not hungry for getting, Lamott says... we're hungry for giving.* When we root ourselves in joy and gratitude, we'll begin to see that all around us, won't we? And we can see now, how living in peace with each other, supporting each other *and* rejoicing and praying without ceasing go hand in hand. Doing one will support the other. And together, they'll bring us all to deeper joy and greater connection with God. But what next? What is the third key Paul gives us?

Paul reminds us, that we do not follow Jesus idly or without discernment. And actually, some of the most common hesitations I hear when it comes to caring for others, or finding joy in all things – is the fear that we'll do it wrong. A fear, really, that is rooted in discernment of what is good and right.

What if that person who I help doesn't *really* need it?
What if they squander this help or take advantage of me?
What if I rejoice today, and then it all goes wrong? Maybe I'll jinx it.

Have you wondered this? Or at least heard these hesitations? Of course, we all have. But here's the thing: We are called not to judgement, but to serve. Not to fear, but to hope. Not to hide, but shine our light. Our joy, and our faithfulness, will be found in our giving and living with love. And who knows? Maybe the person you serve doesn't deserve it. But maybe yours will be the loving action to change their life. And maybe, in giving, you'll remember all that we receive from God without deserving. Love without bounds. Grace without strings.

Still, this does not mean we live without discernment. Because while God promises to be with us always, so too, do we know that evils exist always among us. And so Paul reminds us, to discern what we see in front of us. We do this by asking: Is this of the Spirit? Is it rooted and grounded in love? Does this draw me closer in love of God and my neighbor? Or is this the evil one, causing division? To discern this, means we need to carefully assess what's around us. From the emails in our inbox, to the news on our televisions, and even to the messages we hear from preachers or conversations with family. A common scam, that we've probably all heard or seen, are texts and emails that say things like, "*This is Pastor Bethany with an urgent need. Please buy gift cards and send me the codes. Don't call me, but send them here.*" And you, the faithful member here – dutifully send those funds. There are people who prey on your goodness. And so Paul reminds us to be discerning: is this the way that your church or pastor would ask for help? Is it weird they don't want you to call them? Is the email or phone number *actually* theirs?

We live in an age of misinformation where it is easy to believe or share lies, even unintentionally. Which is why this call to discernment of what is good is so important. Sometimes we believe the misinformation because it *sounds* like it could be true. Or because it supports what we *want* to be true. Last year, Facebook reported that misinformation on their site got 6 times as many clicks as factual, reliable news during the last election. And unfortunately, there are people around the world who intentionally prey on us because of this. Their interests are to sow division, to capitalize on fear, and to make us more suspicious of each other and the world around us.

Paul's words are so important. *Examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good.* Our tasks of discernment go deeper than spam emails or facebook posts. Because Paul, you'll remember, is talking to a congregation. And he's reminding them to examine everything they hear around them, too – including their politicians and leaders, their pastors and teachers. There will be some, Paul warns, who say they speak in God's name – but clearly are misguided. They may have their own motivations, or be caught up in their own mistakes too. But it always for you, the hearer, to be asking: is this teaching causing me to love God and our neighbor more fully? Is this in line with what I know about Jesus and his teachings? Or is this motivated, possibly, by something else?

Howard Thurman, a great American writer, theologian and civil rights activist – tells a story about his Grandma who was a deeply faithful Christian, and a slave. She says that a few times a year, they would hear from the plantation owners preacher in worship. And almost always, he would choose words from Paul. A favorite, she said, was "*slaves, be obedient to your masters*" and the preacher promised they would have blessed lives if they were obedient to their slave owner. But Howard's Grandma knew otherwise, and said if she ever was free – she would never study those passages again. True to her word, when she and Howard read scripture – she avoided those "clobber passages," as they are called, that did not coincide with what she knew to be true from God. And instead, she read in length from the Psalms and prophets and Gospels. But her discerning told her – that the plantation preacher was motivated by something other than drawing people near to God and loving their neighbor.

Our scripture is an incredible gift from God, but it can be made to say almost anything, if we cherry pick passages in the right way. So it is important that we faithfully study, pray, and discern what God is speaking to us. Our reading of scripture has changed over time. We have countless interpretations and translations of scripture, all looking to most accurately share the message of Jesus. But sometimes we get it wrong. And as we discover more and more about the original texts – we change course. Or as we learn more about how to live justly, we change course. There was a time, in the not so far past, where passages on slavery were upheld as reasons for *why* it was an acceptable practice. Or likewise, passages that told us women were to remain silent. Ha! We know, of course, that those passages don't speak rightly for how Jesus calls us to live and love our neighbor and treat others. And so, we have changed course, and make a concerted effort to do better.

Discerning the Spirit's work among us is an ongoing task, that goes hand in hand with our willingness to grow and change our minds. Even well-meaning people can get it wrong sometimes. And yes, this includes your pastors and leaders, and sometimes even yourself. We've got a rule in our house – you don't get in trouble for making mistakes. You get in trouble for *lying* about those mistakes. Now, that doesn't mean there aren't natural consequences for things. If you break a game – you don't be able to play it any more. But, if you *lie* about how it broke... then you're in trouble. The same thing in all of life, right? It's not just being misinformed about something that gets us into trouble, it's the unwillingness to learn and grow. Yet doing so, while it might feel scary, will set us free to deeper joy and intimacy with Christ. Because the more we can align our living and thinking with love of God and neighbor, the more we are in the business of lifting one another up, and make space for all God's children... the more joy we'll find.

Here is the good news. That God, in Christ and thru the Spirit, is with us always and everywhere. And this presence, is what gives us confidence to live fully – and faithfully – into these key principles. Trusting in the Spirit's presence we can more fully care for others, rejoice, pray, and cling to what is good. Knowing that as we do, we're promised a rich and abundant life. Because here's the thing: this entire letter from Paul to the Thessalonians is one big reminder that faith is something that is lived, courageously and faithfully, because we are *already* called God's beloved. Named as People of the Light, and freed to share that goodness with the world around us. We are people of an active and present God, called to be an active and present church to all the world. Now, I can think of no better way to close those series on the book of 1st Thessalonians, than sharing with you the final words of Paul's letter. May his words bless and encourage you:

Let us pray: Good and loving God, from the beginning of time you have created and called us good. Throughout every season of life – in any time of grief, persecution, isolation, or despair – you call us near to you and remind us that you are always there. Equip us to follow you fully and faithfully, living as people of your light – shining brightly for all the world to see. Make us a people who discern and give thanks for your goodness, rejoice in your presence, and lovingly care for your beloved children everywhere. In the name of your amazing son, our lord, we pray: amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 14, 2022

Prayer for the Week

Loving, living God, be with me now. Show me your ways and guide my steps each day. As a child of your light, make me to live faithfully, anchored by hope, and acting -always- in care and

service of others. Encourage and inspire me today, that through the reading and studying of your word, I may draw nearer to you. Make my light to shine brightly, your goodness evident through all I say and do. Amen.

Monday, August 15

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Romans 12:18; Matthew 7:12

Brothers and sisters, we ask you to respect those who are working with you, leading you, and instructing you. Think of them highly with love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.

Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

Observation

As we look this week at how Paul closed his first letter to the Thessalonians, we'll see how his guidance to those early converts echoed Jesus' teaching and how Paul developed the same themes in some of his later letters. The first two verses of his closing today encapsulated the premise that was contained in Matthew's later reporting of what we know as the golden rule. It sounded simple but is hard enough to do that it bears repeating: treat other people the same way you wish them to treat you.

Application

It can be easy to think of the Golden Rule as simply being nice. But Jesus said that short phrase held the deep spiritual essence of all the Law and the Prophets – that is, the entire Hebrew Scriptures. What people or conditions make it hardest for you to truly treat others as you wish they'd treat you? When has someone else treated you by the Golden Rule's standard? How did that affect you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I wish my thoughts toward others just naturally turned to respect, love and peace. Reshape me from the inside out so that I treat others as I want them to treat me. Amen.

Tuesday, August 16

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15; Romans 12:9-10; Matthew 7:4-6

Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are disorderly. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else.

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other.

How can you say to your brother or sister, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye. Don't give holy things to dogs, and don't throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you.

Observation

Paul loved the Thessalonian Christians, but he was also realistic about the ways flawed humanity shows up even in a group who honestly aim to be faithful. He listed “those who are disorderly,” “the discouraged,” and “the weak,” adding that at times they would need to “be patient with everyone.”

Application

Jesus used a hyperbolic image (the log in your eye) to remind his hearers that we all have faults, and so we all need mercy. Recognizing our own failings makes us more forgiving toward others. How can honest self-evaluation and openness to hearing what bothers other people help build relationships that strengthen both of you rather than tearing each other down?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, shape me into a person who can warn, comfort, help and be patient with others. Guide me to always pursue the good for others and for your kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, August 17

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22; Philippians 4:4-7; Matthew 12:30-32

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Don’t suppress the Spirit. Don’t brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil.

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Whoever isn’t with me is against me, and whoever doesn’t gather with me scatters. Therefore, I tell you that people will be forgiven for every sin and insult to God. But insulting the Holy Spirit won’t be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Human One will be forgiven. But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit won’t be forgiven, not in this age or in the age that is coming.

Observation

In his commentary, N. T. Wright compared these verses in 1 Thessalonians to “the equivalents of the little rules of grammar, the rhymes and memory-aids which nudge the mind in the right direction...which Paul has put together so that his young churches will quickly learn the language of Christian behavior.” Verse 19 echoed Jesus’ teaching: the Holy Spirit, not just our own ideas, must direct our growth into the language of Christian behavior.

Application

Visual artists know that often how we frame a picture alters what we focus on when looking at the picture. Paul urged a kind of framing in 1 Thessalonians 5 and Philippians 4. When we bring the things that cause us stress into prayer, we put ourselves and our troubles inside a much bigger picture: the story of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ – and that leads to thanksgiving. What helps you look at God’s perspective on life’s big picture more than any unpleasant little details?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, my goal is to face life every day with gratitude, prayer, and openness to your Spirit. When I forget, please remind me and call me back on course. Amen.

Thursday, August 18

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; John 17:15-17; Acts 20:32

Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.

I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. They don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth.

Now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all whom God has made holy.

Observation

John's gospel tells us that on the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed that God would make his followers holy through the word of truth. Paul knew about that as he wrote 1 Thessalonians, perhaps 30-40 years earlier. He had told his converts in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7 that God's will was that their lives should be dedicated (or holy, sanctified) to him, then repeated it in today's reading. Living for God is not a part-time, one-day-a-week choice, but a commitment of your whole life.

Application

Paul had made it plain that the Thessalonians (like us) played a role in living holy lives dedicated to God (i.e. "This means that you stay away from sexual immorality" – 1 Thessalonians 4:3). Keeping us intact and blameless when we meet Jesus is not mainly our doing but God's. Verse 24: "The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this." How do you sense God's Spirit transforming you into a person who can meet Jesus "intact and blameless"?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I marvel that you love me so much that you not only died for me, but that you patiently work in me to change my messy self into one who can trustingly meet you when you come. Thank you, Lord! Amen.

Friday, August 19

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:25-28; Colossians 4:2-4; Philippians 4:21-22

Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. By the Lord's authority, I order all of you to have this letter read aloud to all the brothers and sisters. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray for us also. Pray that God would open a door for the word so we can preach the secret plan^[a] of Christ—which is why I'm in chains. Pray that I might be able to make it as clear as I ought to when I preach.

Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters with me send you their greeting. All God's people here, especially those in Caesar's household, send you their greeting.

Observation

At the start of this letter, Paul assured the Thessalonians that he prayed for them (1 Thessalonians 1:2). At the end he showed it was just one-way as he asked them to please pray for him. However much it may amuse us, the holy kiss was a part of worship (see Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12). And with no copying machines, it made sense to read the letters aloud to the congregation.

Application

The very first verse of this letter said, "Grace and peace to all of you." The last verse closed the circle: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you." At its core, Paul's message was the grace of God, the simple yet deep truth that had changed his life and those of his hearers and readers. What helps you continually bring your own spiritual journey back to God's grace at the very center?

Prayer

O God, like the tax collector Jesus talked about, I continually pray, "God, show mercy to me, a sinner." You always answer that prayer, and I offer you my life in gratitude. Amen.

Saturday, August 20

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Brothers and sisters, we ask you to respect those who are working with you, leading you, and instructing you. Think of them highly with love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are disorderly. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't suppress the Spirit. Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil. Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.

Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. By the Lord's authority, I order all of you to have this letter read aloud to all the brothers and sisters. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

Observation

This week we've worked our way through all the pieces of Paul's closing in his very early letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. But it seems worthwhile to end our study by reading his complete closing, as his first hearers would have heard it. You might consider reading it aloud, either by yourself and/or with your spouse or family. Listen for the love and pastoral concern that fills every line. Try to imagine how it spoke to Christians living in a thriving Greek port city full of people who lived by very different values than the ones Paul had taught them. And receive at the end, just as those Thessalonian Christians did, the renewed, emphasized gift of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Application

Faith is not simply one aspect of our lives, separate from work, finances, family, or entertainment. Paul made no such separation. Faith is embedded in even the ordinary, mundane tasks as in the most consequential aspects of life. Respecting co-workers and helping

the weak are just as essential as praying without ceasing. Consider the current state of your soul. Which parts of Paul's teaching are you living, saturated with God's grace? Are there any that you thought didn't have anything to do with your commitment to Jesus? If so, how can you bring them into connection with your faith?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, words like love, peace, pray, faithful, and grace, aren't just Sunday words. They are your gifts every day. Weave them ever more tightly into the fabric of my life. Amen.