

Navigating “Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry”

Philippians 4:4-9 Habakkuk 3:16-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Did you notice the title of today's sermon? “Navigating ‘Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry’”. If you're thinking that's a bit on the nerdy and geeky side, and hence the sermon that will follow, you would be correct. But I'll get to that in a moment.

Over the years, I have preached on the topic of gratitude many, many times, especially as we get close to the holiday of Thanksgiving. Since that's still over a month away, this is a bit of a primer. The Epistle Reading for today, Philippians 4:4-9, is often used as a basis to explore the importance of gratitude and being thankful. We are told to “**Rejoice in the Lord always**”. By the way, I find a bit of relief when realizing that it doesn't state that we are to rejoice always (which is basically an impossible task), but rather to rejoice in God. And why – because God is near.

This passage also says we are to exhibit the virtue of gentleness. And so that we do not worry about anything, regardless of our circumstances in life, we are to express our requests to God through prayer *with thanksgiving*. The resulting promise comes in the declaration that follows, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Perhaps we all need to be more intentional in giving that a try. Here's a similar scripture passage that might help, Colossians 3:15, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. *And be thankful.*”

Gratitude and thankfulness are obviously an important key in navigating our journey through life. Yet, many are finding it harder these days to feel that way. My heart can barely handle the grief I feel when watching the evening news these days. Stay informed, yes. But protect your own well-being and state of mind. And perhaps our passage in Philippians can also help in a practical way. Following the list in the Philippians 4:8, search for and focus on: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, any excellence and anything worthy of praise, and think about these things.” But let us do more than simply think about these things. Thank God for them. Then, allow them to lead you to respond in thoughts and deeds of gratitude and thanksgiving. **Our very practice of giving thanks – the act of thanksgiving – can indeed bring God's Sacred Presence more readily and clearly to our consciousness, recognition, and experience.**

One of the things we boomers (as in baby boomers, not boomer sooners, as I had originally thought when I first heard this term) and previous generations are learning from **those who are younger, at least in relationship to religion, is they are interested not so much in learning things about God as they are in the personal and communal experience of God.** And when it comes to God, remember that thanking God for our blessings in life isn't really for God's benefit. Rather, it benefits *us* as we learn to live life in a spirit of

gratitude. In the process, we often become even more aware just how much we are the recipients of God's grace.

Not surprisingly, there's not a religion or type of spirituality at any time in history or any place in the world that doesn't include thankfulness as a vital part of its path to wholeness and well-being. As a spiritual exercise, therefore, I'd like to encourage you to **reflect upon your own pattern of giving thanks and showing appreciation and gratitude.**

I get a weekly email newsletter from an organization called the SALT Project, a progressive Christian blog. In one entitled, "A Brief Theology of Thanksgiving" there is a section called "The Astounding Power of Gratitude" and it states:

If we think of "gratitude" primarily as a kind of duty to discharge we're missing the boat entirely, effectively reducing one of life's wonders to mere good manners. On the contrary, gratitude is a vital force in the world, a profoundly humanizing act that builds relationships, communities, and healthy human hearts.

It goes on to state what is now widely known, "The science on this is in, and it's overwhelming: in study after study, gratitude has been shown to lead to stronger relationships, better sleep, lower blood pressure, fewer trips to the doctor, fewer depressive symptoms, more patience, and more perseverance, among other benefits." It goes on to state:

In one particularly intriguing study, **gratitude turns out to be a powerful antidote to the "Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry," our all-too-common tendency to focus on obstacles (headwinds) and overlook blessings (tailwinds), an imbalance that over time leads to feeling aggrieved and resentful.**

In short, focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness; focusing on tailwinds breeds appreciation. And the act of thanksgiving helps call our attention to the winds at our backs."

Okay, now comes the geeky part. I googled the term "Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry" and found lots of articles which I will now try to summarize the next few minutes. This term was coined in a 2016 article in the *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology* by **Thomas Gilovich**, Professor of Psychology at Cornell University, and **Shai Davidai**, who got his PhD from Cornell and became an Assistant Professor in the Management Division of Columbia Business School. I provide that information for those of you who rightly demand to know the legitimacy of good credentials.

The concept, as a metaphor, is often explained this way. Picture yourself on a run, or perhaps riding a bike, even paddling a canoe. The wind is strong and pushing against you. You feel yourself working hard for every step, pedal, or paddle. You are constantly thinking how hard the headwind is making your journey. You try to put it out of your mind, but it is always there reminding you of its impact. But then, you turn around and the wind is now at your back helping to push you forward.

This extensive study found that even though we recognize the helpfulness of the tailwind, we perceive it isn't nearly as strong as when it was in our face. And after a while, the tailwind isn't even noticed at all. So, in a nutshell, **we tend to give more weight to the influence of the barriers to our successes than to that which helps us reach successfulness. This produces an unbalanced bias, an asymmetry, that focusses more on the obstacles, hardships, and disadvantages in our life (because they are so tangible, obvious, and in-**

our-faces), while the benefits, opportunities, and good fortunes we enjoy tend to blend into the scenery and the normalcy of everyday life.

I experienced something like this when I was on my sabbatical earlier this year at Montreat (Presbyterian) Conference Center outside of Asheville, North Carolina, nestled amongst the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I spent one morning on a very strenuous hike. It was much harder than I planned, forgetting a steep hike like this used to be fairly easy – decades and decades ago. I could have sworn that I hiked much more uphill than downhill. As it turned out, of course, I began and ended my hike at the very same spot.

This asymmetry in thinking, regardless of the circumstances, is directly tied to our sometimes inability to recognize and give thanks for those tailwinds in life, such as blessings and even our privileges. Tying all of this to gratitude, the two professors write in their study:

Most of us feel we face more headwinds and obstacles than everyone else — which breeds resentment. We also undervalue the tailwinds that help us — which leaves us ungrateful and unhappy.

We have to pay attention to the barriers in front of us because we have to get over them, or get through them in some way. We have to overcome them. We don't have to pay attention to those things that are boosting us along. We can just be boosted along. And that fundamental asymmetry in attention is the headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry.

Herein lies the benefit of recognizing this tendency, this asymmetry in thinking and perception. It helps us realize **we need to pay more attention to those things, and those people, who help propel us forward in life, and therefore become more grateful. While it's always easier to identify the headwinds in our lives, I encourage you this week to ask yourself, "What are my tailwinds?"** This, in turn, plants seeds of gratitude, even when we aren't feeling it. Understanding the barriers to gratitude is the first step to having more of it.

I want, now, to make a final point before closing this sermon. **From a social justice perspective, let us remember that tailwind opportunities do not always blow with equal strength and distribution.** There are others who may not share the tailwinds we were afforded in life. There are often stronger headwinds, as in the lack of opportunities and privilege, brought on by **individual and systemic prejudices** based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, among others.

Think, therefore, of ways you may **help provide a tailwind for someone who needs a lift or a push, and provide it.** If possible, create opportunities for them. Put wind at their back.

And in the process of recognizing our own tailwinds, let us grow into more grateful people. And let us rejoice in God always!

Amen.

Resources:

- Shai Davidai and Tom Gilovich, "The headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry: An availability bias in assessments of barriers and blessings", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2016.
- Jon Miller, "Headwinds, Tailwinds, Continuous Improvement and Respect for Humanity", June 10, 2017.
- Brad Porteus, "Privilege is Wind at Your Back (and Not Even Noticing It)", Nov. 13, 2019.
- Colin B. Gabler, "The Tailwinds of White Privilege...And What We Can Do About It", July, 10, 2020.
- Matt Coleman, "How the 'Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry Shapes Your Thinking", 2023.