

AN ENCOURAGING WORD FOR TROUBLING TIMES #137 (by Rev. Dr. Alice Wolfe, 11/25/20)

"Thank God for Your Thorns!"

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess. 5:18, NIV)

(Author of the following story is unknown.)

Sandra felt as low as the heels of her Birkenstocks as she pushed against a November gust and the florist shop door. Her life had been easy, like a spring breeze. Then in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, a minor automobile accident stole her ease. During this Thanksgiving week she would have delivered a son. She grieved over her loss. As if that weren't enough her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose holiday visit she coveted, called saying she could not come. What's worse, Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting her grief was a God-given path to maturity that would allow her to empathize with others who suffer. "Had she lost a child? No—she has no idea what I'm feeling," Sandra shuddered. Thanksgiving? "Thankful for what?" she wondered. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?

"Good afternoon, may I help you?" The flower shop clerk's approach startled her. "Sorry," said Jenny, "I just didn't want you to think I was ignoring you." "I...I need an arrangement." "For Thanksgiving?" Sandra nodded. "Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favorite I call the Thanksgiving Special?"

Jenny saw Sandra's curiosity and continued. "I'm convinced that flowers tell stories; that each arrangement insinuates a particular feeling. Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude this Thanksgiving?" "Not exactly!" Sandra blurted. "Sorry, but in the last five months, everything that could go wrong has." Sandra regretted her outburst but was surprised when Jenny said, "I have the perfect arrangement for you."

The door's small bell suddenly rang. "Barbara, hi!" Jenny said. She politely excused herself from Sandra and walked toward a small workroom. She quickly reappeared carrying a massive arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Only, the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped, no flowers. "Want this in a box?" Jenny asked.

Sandra watched for Barbara's response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems and no flowers! She waited for laughter, for someone to notice the absence of flowers atop the thorny stems, but neither woman did. "Yes, please. It's exquisite," said Barbara. "You'd think after three years of getting the special, I'd not be so moved by its significance, but it's happening again. My family will love this one. Thanks." Sandra stared. "Why so normal a conversation about so strange an arrangement?" she wondered. "Ah, said Sandra, pointing. "That lady just left with, ah....." "Yes?" "Well, she had no flowers!" "Right, I cut off the flowers." "Off?" "Off. Yep. That's the Special. I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet." "But, why do people pay for that?" In spite of herself she chuckled. "Do you really want to know?" "I couldn't leave this shop without knowing. I'd think about nothing else!"

"That might be good," said Jenny. "Well," she continued, "Barbara came into the shop three years ago feeling very much like you feel today. She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she faced major surgery."

"Ouch!" said Sandra. "That same year, I lost my husband. I assumed complete responsibility for the shop and for the first time, spent the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel."

"What did you do?" "I learned to be thankful for thorns." Sandra's eyebrows lifted. "Thorns?" "I'm a

Christian, Sandra. God calls us to give thanks to him in *all* circumstances. I've always thanked God for good things in life and I never thought to ask Him why good things happened to me? But, when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time to learn that dark times are important.

I always enjoyed the 'flowers' of life but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God's comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we're afflicted and from His consolation, we learn to comfort others."

Sandra gasped. "A friend read that passage to me and I was furious! I guess the truth is I don't want comfort. I've lost a baby and I'm angry with God." She started to ask Jenny to "go on" when the door's bell diverted their attention. "Hey, Phil!" shouted Jenny as a balding, rotund man entered the shop. She softly touched Sandra's arm and moved to welcome him. He tucked her under his side for a warm hug.

"I'm here for twelve thorny long-stemmed stems!" Phil laughed heartily. "I figured as much," said Jenny. "I've got them ready." She lifted a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerated cabinet. "Beautiful," said Phil. "My wife will love them."

Sandra could not resist asking. "These are for your wife?" Phil saw that Sandra's curiosity matched his when he first heard of a Thorn Bouquet. "Do you mind me asking, "Why thorns?" "In fact, I'm glad you asked," he said. "Four years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were in a real mess, but we slogged through, problem by rotten problem.

We rescued our marriage - our love, really. Last year at Thanksgiving I stopped in here for flowers. I must have mentioned surviving a tough process because Jenny told me that for a long time she kept a vase of rose stems - stems! - as a reminder of what she learned from "thorny" times.

That was good enough for me. I took home stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific thorny situation and give thanks for what the problem taught us. I'm pretty sure this stem review is becoming a tradition."

Phil paid Jenny, thanked her again and as he left, said to Sandra, "I highly recommend the Special!" "I don't know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life." Sandra said to Jenny. "Well, my experience says that thorns make roses more precious. We treasure God's providential care more during trouble than at any other time.

Remember, Sandra, Jesus wore a crown of thorns so that we might know His love. Do not resent thorns." Tears rolled down Sandra's cheeks. For the first time since the accident she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take twelve long-stemmed thorns, please."

"I hoped you would," Jenny said. "I'll have them ready in a minute. Then, every time you see them, remember to appreciate both good and hard times. We grow through both."

"Thank you. What do I owe you?" "Nothing. Nothing but a pledge to work toward healing your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me." Jenny handed a card to Sandra. "I'll attach a card like this to your arrangement but maybe you'd like to read it first. Go ahead, read it."

"My God, I have never thanked You for my thorns! I have thanked You a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear, teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed to You by the path of pain. Show me that, through my tears, the colors of Your rainbow look much more brilliant." - George Matheson

Jenny said, "Happy Thanksgiving, Sandra," handing her the Special." "I look forward to our knowing each other better." Sandra smiled. She turned, opened the door. . .and walked toward hope.

LIVE IT!

Pray and reflect: For what thorns do you want (or need) to thank God? How has God blessed you or help you learn/grown through them? Thank God for your thorns and blessings!