



“Ever Thankful”

Scripture – Philippians 4:4-14

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, November 22, 2015

When are you most likely to feel a sense of gratitude erupting within you? When you are with family or friends gathered around the table for a sumptuous feast? When you have paid all your bills? When you watch a child squeal with delight as he rips the wrapping off a present?

When do you experience a grateful heart? When you witness the sky light up with streaks of red and orange as the sun sets? When you are in the midst of a wonderful vacation you had been anticipating for months?

A few days ago, my phone dinged as a text arrived. Our younger daughter had sent a sonogram of our granddaughter who will be born next month. This was no Rorschach test where you stare at a blob and imagine this must be her arm and that must be her head. No, this was an amazingly clear photograph of her face. The only way that could not have filled me with awe, was if I no longer had a pulse.

The next day, my phone dinged again as a text came in from our other daughter. Our eight year-old grandson – a ball of energy constantly in motion – had to lie perfectly still inside an MRI for more than 20 minutes that morning. The text was a photo of him enjoying a burger and fries at his favorite restaurant after successfully completing his morning ordeal inside the confining tube. Just seeing his Cheshire cat grin prompted a tear of gratitude.

In the New Testament, there are several letters attributed to the Apostle Paul and in nearly every one of them he expressed his thanks to God for the congregation he was writing. One exception was his Letter to the Galatians. They had made him mad as a hornet, so he skipped the niceties and singed them with his outrage.

Galatians aside, Paul expressed his gratitude to God for the other churches to which he corresponded. Yet, his Letter to the Philippians still stands out because Paul’s praise was so profusive. At the beginning he writes, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.” (Phil. 1:3-4)

Every letter, email, text and tweet has a context. Are you writing to a loved one, a co-worker, or someone you barely know? Is that person riding high or struggling with adversity?

Perhaps more importantly, what is *your* situation when you write? Are you writing immediately following a stressful meeting? Perhaps more dangerous, is this before your morning coffee?

The context of both Paul, the writer, and the Philippians, the recipients is noteworthy. The people of the congregation in Philippi lived under Roman occupation, and thus the Roman emperor, not a peasant from Nazareth, was to be worshiped. Claiming allegiance to Jesus opened the door to persecution. Yet, Paul wrote to them, “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice!”(Phil. 4:4)

Had Paul lost his mind? Was he insensitive to their circumstances? Was Paul simply naïve? No. No. And NO!

Paul was not lounging on the shores of the Mediterranean, sipping a glass of wine. He was locked away in prison with no idea whether he would be freed – except possibly by death. What would be the tone of your letter if you were Paul?

Listen again to what Paul writes FROM prison TO persecuted people. After encouraging them to “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he says, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” That is, despite your situation, express your gratitude to God.

~~ ALL SING: *In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful; in the Lord, I will rejoice. Look to God, do not be afraid. Lift up your voices, the Lord is near. Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.* ~~

I will bet you know someone who lives a relatively comfortable life, yet habitually complains. Alternatively, I will bet you know someone who has taken some harsh blows in life, yet she possesses a spirit of gratitude. She can smile, be light-hearted, and talk about her good fortune. That’s because gratitude is not based primarily on your circumstances. It has much more to do with your basic view of life. And your underlying view of life is shaped by your spiritual life.

In her book, *The Gift of Thanks*, Margaret Visser talks about how crucial it is to teach children to be grateful. Parents: it’s not simply about teaching your children proper manners. That would be a good enough reason, but there is more at stake here. Teaching a child to be grateful helps to determine what kind of person he/she will become. Gratitude arises from paying attention, appreciating people and expressing thanks. Gratitude is more than an emotion. It is a worldview and a way of being in the world. Gratitude depends less upon a specific circumstance than on a person’s character, upbringing,¹ and spiritual core.

Parents: if you want a recipe for creating a grateful person, here are four key ingredients. You may already have these in place. 1) your child needs to see *you* routinely expressing thanks to others, 2) your child needs to experience the joy of being thanked, 3) your child needs to write thank-you notes, and 4) your child needs to develop the habit of thanking God. A great way to accomplish that is just before going to sleep, recount all the good things that happened that day and say a prayer of thanks. If they do these four, they will become grateful people.

Where is your basic focus? Is it on what you have or what you lack? When life throws something unexpected your way, do you choose gratitude or do you choose victimhood? When a challenge strikes, is your thought: how can I make the best of this? Or, poor me!

In his thank-you note to the Philippians, Paul shared a gem of wisdom with all people of faith. He wrote, “Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Phil. 4:8)

Where we focus our attention, determines the quality of our lives. People of faith are not more fortunate than others. We express our gratitude to God because we recognize that life is a gift. Many feel that they are entitled to good health, good friendships and good opportunities. They become angry when life does not turn out as they think they deserve. People of faith know that we did not create life nor the world in which we live. It is all a marvelous gift from the Creator of heaven and earth.

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In his book, *365 Thank Yous*, author John Kralik tells of writing a thank-you note each day for an entire year. He did not strike upon this idea when his life was soaring. His “small law firm was losing money and losing its lease, and he was going through a difficult divorce. He was living in a small apartment where he often slept on the floor. Kralik had reached middle age and he felt he was at the end of his rope.”²

Then, one day, hiking a mountain trail, he became lost. As the sun was swiftly setting his sense of panic was rapidly rising. A thousand voices were rattling his brain, however, one stood out. It said, “Until you learn to be grateful for what you have, you will not receive what you want.” He did not know the origin of the voice, but it was so compelling that by the time he reached the bottom, he had a plan. He made a resolution to write a thank-you note each day for a year. Yet, even as he made his pledge, he had grave doubts that he could pull it off. He writes, “Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so.”

Despite his doubts, he began by writing people who were close to him. That lasted for a while, but one day he hit a wall. He could not think of a single person to thank. But he stopped at his regular Starbucks and the barista greeted him by name: “John, your usual venti?” – and with a big smile. Kralik thought to himself, “In this age of impersonal relationships, someone cared enough to learn my name and what I like to drink in the morning.”

He lingered at the counter long enough to catch the young man’s name. It was Scott; and that night he wrote Scott a thank-you note for the friendly greeting and for taking the time to remember his name. That small act of kindness had given him a lift.

The next morning he handed Scott the note, but Scott lost his smile and pushed the note aside. It was not until the next day that Kralik discovered why. Scott had assumed it was a letter of complaint. After all, who writes a thank-you note to the person who serves you coffee?

In his book, Kralik reflects on how the discipline of expressing thanks each day changed his approach to life. It even prompted him to start going to church. He wrote, “I had considered myself something of an atheist for years, but I started going to a church. The dominant message was that grace was available to everyone ...Through the process of writing thank-you notes, I came to believe I was blessed.”³

Do you believe that life is not an accident of the universe, but that there is a loving Creator? Do you know that God cares about you and gives you the freedom to return that love? Do you know that when life looks bleak, it will not last forever? New opportunities will present themselves. Much will depend on your view of life, being awake and nurturing your spiritual core. Gratitude recognizes a word, a gesture, an opportunity.

A Presbyterian pastor named Charlie Durham tells about a time when he was trying to recruit a member to serve in a particular capacity. “They were standing in the dining room of their church and she was explaining how many demands were on her and how she could not possibly add one more. As she was speaking, a woman in the back of the dining room caught their attention. Barely able to move her cumbersome walker, this woman’s journey toward the choir room made both of them stop and watch her in silence. It was her third battle with cancer. With practically no strength and thin beyond recognition, she was making her way – red bandana on her head – to choir rehearsal.

The woman who had been explaining that her life was too full, wiped her tears and said, “I would be honored to serve.”⁴ In a matter of seconds, she switched from a mindset of being overburdened to a mindset of gratitude for her good health and for the opportunity to serve.

In prison and uncertain of his fate, Paul wrote, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

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NOTES

1. Martin B. Copenhaver, “A Thank-You Letter,” May 8, 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Michael Lindvall, “Counterintuitive Truth,” September 13, 2015.

Prayers of the People ~ Reverend Thomas Speers

Holy God, Holy One, Holy Three, hear our prayers this day:

We pray for your church all over the world. May the life we discover in you bind us to each other and to the world you love, for no need is beyond the strength of your call and no child of yours is expendable.

Merciful God, give us wisdom and courage beyond our imagining. We pray for each leader who might be an instrument of peace in a troubled land. By the movement of your reconciling spirit, bless your people with the courage to reach past old wounds and persistent fears.

God of resurrection, bring life where hope has died. We pray for friends and strangers in the grip of addiction. Make us able companions for each other, and bless us with hope that bears fruit.

We pray for unsettled economies and those whose needs are overlooked in the choices of the powerful. May we, who know so much privilege, bear our responsibilities with open eyes and open hands.

We pray for all who stand at the thresholds of life: your children who are soon to be born, and your children who are soon to go home.

We give thanks for new faces to love, ideas to ponder, work to do – for our families and this time of Thanksgiving and we marvel at the sturdy friendships and persistent memories that sustain us when the way is hard. May each be a reminder of your love and your provisions.

We thank you for the gift of song – for notes that speak when words fail, and choirs that practice at the end of long days. Give strength to leaders who call forth the best from us and invite us to breathe together.

Holy One, keep calling us into the world – your world – as salt and light. Equip each of us for the challenges we will face until we learn to worship in the most unlikely places, for you are the source of our song and the well from which we pray, wherever we are planted.

By the power of your Spirit, and surrounded by your saints, we make our prayer with resurrection hope, in the name of Jesus, who taught us when we pray to say: Our Father...