

Wesley United Methodist Church
October 27, 2019

Text: Acts 4:32-35
It's a Wonder-Full Life
Looking with Gratitude

It's important for us to understand the context of today's scripture reading otherwise it can be unnecessarily disturbing. It sounds like we are being told to sell everything we have and put it into a common pot for the community. But let me assure you, that no one is asking, or even suggesting, that we do that.

The early Christian community that is described here expected Jesus to return in a short time probably no more than a few years – if that long. They thought they didn't need to be concerned about long-term planning and this practice of selling everything may have led to some hardship down the road. However, what they were aiming for is something worth thinking about and celebrating.

They were acting out of a faith that focused on gratitude for what they did have. They were willing and eager to put whatever they had together to help create a community where no one was left out, no one felt alone, and no one needed to be fearful of their well-being. If you think of a community like that – where you are included, do not feel alone, and know that your future is secure, it does seem to describe a wonder-full life.ⁱ

When I think of a community like that, I think of a community of companionship and hospitality – a community where all of Jesus' followers are welcome and included and it doesn't matter whether they have lots of resources or don't have "two pennies to rub together". I think of a community like that described in the song, "They'll Know we are Christians

by our love”. “We will work with each other. We will work side by side. ... and we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride... We will walk with each other. We will walk hand in hand and together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”ⁱⁱ

As I was writing those words on Friday, I was very aware that all too often today, many non-Christians would probably not name love as an overwhelmingly identifiable characteristic of Christians. That made me very sad. I believe that the characteristics of love and gratitude are so basic to Jesus’ teaching that they should be at the very core of who we are, and how we behave, when we claim to be followers of Christ. I believe that love and gratitude should almost ooze out of our pores. However, it can be easy to get so caught up in our busy and often complicated lives that we overlook all the blessings and gifts from God around us.

Henry Ward Beecher once wrote, “If one should give me a dish and sand and tell me that there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it and now would it draw to itself the almost invisible particles by the mere power of attraction.

“The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day and as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings, only the iron in God’s sand is gold!”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are all sorts of practices that encourage us to develop that thankful heart and to pay attention to little things during the day for which we are grateful. Some people, including myself, have tried to keep a

gratitude journal. In my case, I resolved to write 10 things every day for which I was grateful. I confess that I was not particularly successful in keeping this journal, although I like to think that it helped me at least notice those things a little more. However, I do have a friend who every night posts on Facebook three things for which she was grateful during the day.

This week I came across an article called “A Gift of Gratitude” written by Rev. Dick Garland 7 years ago. He wrote, “For it is when we give thanks to God that we see the core of who we are. The truth is that, when we sort it all out, it is more important that we be grateful for what we have, than it is to have a lot. It demonstrates a common life of gratitude and devotion, witness and service, celebration and discipleship.”^{iv}

There is a legend told “of a man who found the barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart, and on finding the seeds of discouragement more numerous than others, he learned that those seeds could be made to grow almost anywhere. When Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place in which he could never get them to thrive. ‘And where is that?’ asked the man. Satan replied sadly, ‘In the heart of a grateful person.’”^v

There are different kinds of gratitude. Diana Butler Bass identifies what she calls “cheap gratitude” that is kind of a secular prosperity gospel that says we will be happy if we just accumulate enough and are thankful enough. There is also “obligatory gratitude” which has no heart. Obligatory gratitude is present when we feel that if someone does us a favor, we owe them back, somehow need to repay them. It makes gratitude into a kind of transaction. Being “deeply grateful” however happens when we cultivate of life of thankfulness. It leads to more compassion for others, a greater

awareness of the sacred in the middle of life, a deeper commitment to justice and a much fuller life.^{vi}

Gratitude is about far more than what we receive. It is also about what we give. When we cultivate a life of thankfulness, our gratitude overflows in giving. In the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life”, when Mr. Potter kept the envelope of money that Willie Bailey was going to deposit instead of returning it to him, George Bailey faced certain ruin and decided to end his life. At the end of the movie, the town people came to his house, each bringing what money they could. They gave it to George and together raised the money that was needed to replace the misplaced money and satisfy the bank examiners.

They were grateful for what George Bailey and his business had done and meant in their lives, but it didn’t stop there. Now they came to give out of their gratitude. Together they did what would have seemed overwhelming and impossible for any one of them. We do that all the time in the church through our offerings and times when we come together to combine our energy and abilities to do what none of us can do alone.

I imagine that each of them felt good that they were able to help George; that they were able to give to him in his hour of need. Nobody pressured them to give, but when they knew what was happening, their gratitude motivated them to give to help the one who had helped them. Out of our gratitude to God, we are also motivated to give back to God and to God’s people, both those we know and those we have never met.

There are so many ways that we can give a gift of gratitude. Anything that we do for another can be a gift of gratitude if we do it out of an understanding that we have been so blessed and gifted. “A cheerful heart, a note, a heart-centered hug, a prayer of thanks, music of praise, a

flower from the garden, an encouraging word, a smile, a quiet presence and more.”^{vii} All of these seem simple but they can be amazing gifts of gratitude.

Our faith encourages us to make gratitude a way of life. In Dick Garland’s article, he tells about Edward William Bok who was a Dutch-born American editor and Pulitzer Prize winning author. For 30 years he was the editor of the Ladies’ Home Journal. He became very successful and among other things eventually created a sanctuary for birds and people – as a special place that would touch the soul with beauty and quiet. He did this as a gift of gratitude to the American people. But when he first arrived in Brooklyn as a child, he washed the windows of a bakery shop after school to help support his family. His family was so poor that we used to go out in the street with a basket every day to collect stray bits of coal that had fallen in the gutter where the coal wagons had delivered fuel.^{viii}

He never forgot what his grandmother had told him when he left the Netherlands at the age of six. She said, “Make you the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.” He lived his life trying to make the world a bit better and more beautiful.

We do the same thing when we make gratitude a way of life, when we live every day with eyes open to see the many ways that we have been blessed and the ways that we can express that gratitude to others.

Dick ended his article by saying, “Let us resolve to make it a way of life to express our gratitude for family and friends and all that makes life special – for life and health – for the capacity to endure when things do not turn out as we expected for meaning and purpose and joy in life, and more – for the very presence of God. And then let us resolve to respond to all that we have received with an act of sharing with others a gift of gratitude.

“Just imagine what a wonderful world it would be if each of us sought to live up to the admonition of Edward Bok’s grandmother: ‘Make you the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.’ That would be a gift of gratitude indeed!”^{ix}

ⁱ McFee, Marcia. Worship Design Studio “A Wonder-Full Life Worship Series” Sermon Fodder week 4.

ⁱⁱ Scholtes, Peter. “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” Faith We Sing #2223

ⁱⁱⁱ Hewett, James S. Editor Illustrations Unlimited p.264

^{iv} Garland, F. Richard “A Gift of Gratitude” 10/18/12 posted this week in Facebook.

^v Hewett, p.262 Credited to: V. Norskov Olsen, President, Loma Linda University

^{vi} McFee, Also citing Diana Butler Bass Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks.

^{vii} Garland

^{viii} Wikipedia

^{ix} Garland