

**Wesley United Methodist Church  
November 8, 2020**

**Developing an Attitude of Gratitude  
“Just to Say Thanks”**

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:7-18  
Luke 17:11-19

I was talking with a friend recently, and as we talked we started to almost jokingly apologize to each other because we were being crotchety – not with each other, but just in general. It seemed that with almost everything we talked about our focus was on the problems related to the subject. We had a lot to say about the election, about living and working during a pandemic, about the things we wanted to do but couldn't, and about how much more difficult it is to do the things we used to take for granted.

She's the pastor of a church that had started to go back to in-person worship and as of today, is returning exclusively to virtual worship. The increasing Covid numbers make this the only real way to show love and care for the people involved, but it means going back to recording and editing and producing a worship service that isn't taking place on Sunday morning.

I found myself, silently being thankful that we had not yet started or switched to primarily in-person, or in sanctuary worship. As that thought occurred to me I also found myself being thankful for the many people who are involved in putting together our worship services. I'm thankful for the people who at home record scripture, or calls to worship, or prayers. I'm thankful to Jim who comes here every week to play our opening and closing music and for Mike who comes to record that.

I'm thankful to those who have faithfully been recording songs for us to use during worship. Sometimes they have recorded at home, sometimes here in the sanctuary. I'm thankful to Kristen and Dan and especially to Austin who puts all of our separate recordings together to produce one coherent worship service for us every week.

I'm thankful for my computer and for learning to use Zoom because that is the way that I record all of the pieces that I do for the worship. The list goes on and on and guess what? When I start thinking about all the things for which I am thankful, I realize

that there are a lot of them and the more I think about, the longer the list grows. There are so many things for which I am thankful. I discovered again the truth that what we count, we increase.

When we count our problems and start talking about them, we have more to share. When we start complaining, we just keep fueling the fire and never get to the end of the list. But when we focus on our blessings, on the things for which we are thankful, we always seem to have more.

Now, I've always known that, but sometimes I have to be reminded. I was reminded this time by Kent Millard. Kent is a pastor and a gratitude coach for thousands of congregations in the Midwest. Among others, he has written a small book called, "The Gratitude Path" and I was reading that book as a possible resource for us to talk about stewardship.

Kent caught my attention when he proclaimed that the stewardship campaign that most churches do during the fall to try to plan their finances for the next year, "is usually based on the idea that God is the creator of all we are and have, and we are therefore obligated to be good stewards of God's creation." Been there. Done that. Many times.

But then he went on to talk instead about a "Gratitude Campaign" and said that this recognizes that all we are and have is a gift from God, but we give back to God out of gratitude, not obligation."<sup>i</sup> You see, basic to our relationship with God is not that we are hired servants responsible to God, but rather that we are beloved children of a loving God, who is always with us, never leaves us alone to face the challenges of life.

I find that particularly helpful right now as I wait to hear about who will be the president of our country for the next four years and as I let my imagination run wild with what I think that might mean. In just a few short weeks, we will be entering the season of Advent, preparing for Christmas and we know that will look different to us this year. We know that Halloween looked different last week. Thanksgiving will look different in a couple of weeks. Pretty much everything looks different than it usually does – including counting millions of mail in ballots.

But you know what? I'm one of the many millions who voted by mail this year. I am thankful that I live in a country where I have the right, the opportunity, and the

responsibility to vote for who will be leading the town, state, and country where I live. I'm thankful that I get to vote for those who will be making decisions and passing laws that will affect not only my life but the lives of people who have a different color skin than mine, who believe differently than me, who love differently, who live differently but all of whom as also God's beloved children.

As we approach Advent, I am reminded that this is the season when we talk about Jesus as being Emmanuel, which means "God with us" and I am thankful because if we ever needed to know that God is with us – I think that we need to know that now. Of course, the reality is that we have needed to know that throughout history and throughout our lives.

In the passage from Deuteronomy that Coni read for us, we heard about one of those times when people were being cautioned not to forget that God had been with them and would continue to be. After escaping from slavery in Egypt and wandering through the wilderness for forty years, they were about to enter the promised land. It's a common trait for we humans to call upon God in times of danger or difficulty and then to focus more on our own competence and accomplishments when things are going well. They were being warned exactly against doing this.

They were being reminded that God brought them out of Egypt and had been with them during this long journey. We heard the caution to them that when they have eaten all they want and are living in fine houses they have built, when their herds have multiplied that they should be careful not to boast that they did this all by themselves. They should remember that it was God who led them and helped them and walked with them every step of the way.

They are being reminded that in their lives they should live in ways that remember God's presence with them. They should live their lives in ways that say thank you to God for all that God has done.

Last week when we had our first snow of the season, I picked my grandson up from school and, of course, we had to spend time outside playing in the snow. When we came inside, he wanted some hot chocolate. Unfortunately, I didn't have any. You can bet that my next grocery order included some hot chocolate. When he came this week, I showed it to him and his face lit up and he said, "Thank you, Nana. You're the

best!” He stopped what he was doing because it was suddenly very important to have a cup of hot chocolate.

Did I get the message that he was glad, that he was saying thank you for something very simple that I did? Yes, of course. It also made me feel good, that hot chocolate was important a week later when there was no more snow and he wasn't cold. That's a very very small example of saying thank you, but it was a heartfelt one, not a reluctant “thank you” required by his parents.

That is the way, I believe we should be saying “thank you” to God. It's not an obligation or a polite response, but rather it is a real response to seeing God's love for us active in our lives and in the world around us. As Millard points out, “Gratitude to God is the fundamental scriptural reason and our motivation for giving our time to worship, our talent in service and our financial gifts to support God's ministry in the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

We want to spend time with those we like, with those in whose presence we feel valued and loved. We want to do things with those who help our lives to feel more fulfilled rather than with those who drain the energy from us. When we really know how much God loves us, we want to spend time doing the things that God calls us to do. We want to use our time and abilities and also our finances to doing those things that say draw us closer to God and that help us share God's love with others.

That's why we have over 250 boxes of macaroni and cheese and almost 200 jars of jelly in our entry – food that will be going to the Northern Rhode Island Food Pantry. That's why we took snacks and beverages to the Fire stations in Lincoln last week – to say thank you to them. Both of these are also ways that we say thank you to God.

In our reading from Luke's gospel we heard about 10 lepers who came to Jesus. Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priests who were the ones who certified that someone had been healed. As they went on their way, they discovered that they had been healed. One of them turned around and came back to say thank you to Jesus.

Does that mean the other nine were not thankful? I doubt it. I'm sure that they were thankful. I imagine that they were very excited and probably started to run as fast as they could to get to the priest so that their healing could be verified and they could return to their lives, their homes, their families. I'm sure that they were thankful. I

imagine that when they were once again with their families they probably told their family and friends about their healing.

But one of them went one step further. One of them came back to the source of his healing. One of them turned around and loudly praised God and fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him. My point is that the others were likely also thankful, but they were more focused on getting back to their former lives, or their new lives and they didn't take the time to come back and say thank you to the one who had healed them and made their new lease on life possible.

I want to encourage us to become intentional about saying thank you to the source of all that we are, all that we have, all that we can be. I want to encourage us to develop an attitude of gratitude in all parts of our lives and especially in our relationship with God.

We say and show our thanks to God in many ways. We say thank you to God whenever we worship God. We worship God in formal services like this one. We can also worship God and say thank you when we stand by the ocean, when we look out on a mountain, when we see beautiful snow covered trees, when we look into the eyes of a child.

We say thank you to God when we use our time working for justice, holding the hand of someone in need, voting in ways that promote the principles that are important to God, teaching a child, working in a clinic, a food pantry, a homeless shelter.

We say thank you to God when we give financially to support the ministries of God through our church, when we buy food for the food pantry, when we participate in our adopt a child program at Christmas, when we donate school supplies locally or for the schools we help support in Liberia.

Now, I know that there are many people who do these things and do them without thinking about God. I am grateful that they do because there are many needs around us and we need many many people to respond to these needs. But for those of us who know God's love and who believe that we are to share that love with all of God's people, we do these things as part of our witness to God; as a way of saying thank you to God; as a way of sharing God's love.

Millard reminds us that Jesus frequently gave praise and thanks to God. Jesus lived his life with an attitude of gratitude toward God in all the different circumstances of his life. He called his followers, us, to give constant thanks and praise to God as well. “When we follow Jesus along the gratitude path of life, we discover that we too live close to God and experience God’s abundance and blessings in our lives.”

In a couple of weeks, in our country, we will be celebrating the day we call Thanksgiving. Right now is a good time for us to be intentional about developing an attitude of gratitude. Right now, in a pandemic, in a contentious election, in a time of great anxiety and distress, right now is a very good time for us to be intentional about focusing on our blessings, on the things for which we can be grateful.

This doesn’t mean that we ignore the problems of a pandemic and the many other concerns around us. But it means that even in these times we can and should focus on the things for which we can be thankful. If we do, we will see our awareness multiply. We will see our anxiety level decrease. We will be better able to see the possibilities of what we can do to cope with our current circumstances and how we can be a positive influence in the world.

When we go to our doctor, someone usually uses a stethoscope to check our heart and see how it is functioning. Throughout our lives we need to examine our own hearts frequently to determine if we are living with a grateful heart for all that God has given us. Let me remind us of the words of a song written by Johnson Oatman, Jr in 1897; words that have enabled millions to focus on their blessings from God and to help them overcome the challenges in their lives.<sup>iii</sup>

“When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord has done. Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God has done! Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”<sup>iv</sup>

Millard writes, “Johnson Oatman reminds us in the midst of the challenging times in our lives, ‘when we are discouraged thinking all is lost’ it is then that we most need to ‘count our blessings’. When we are overwhelmed with problems we need to refocus

ourselves and count the blessings God has given us to regain hope and the ability to live victoriously in the midst of the challenges of life.

“What we count, we increase.”<sup>v</sup> When we focus our attention on the blessings in our lives, we always have more to share. The Gratitude path leads us to generosity in our lives and in our congregations when we count our many blessings and give time, talent, and treasure back to God just to say thanks.

Let us pray.

In the midst of all that is happening around us, O God of love, help us to be able to count our blessings. Without ignoring or denying the many challenges around us, help us to also focus on the many blessings in our lives. Open our eyes, our ears and especially our hearts that we may see the many reasons to say thank you to you, and the many ways that we can express that thanks in our lives. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Millard, Kent The Gratitude Path, p.4 c. 2015 Abingdon Press. Note, many of the ideas for this sermon, and this series are from this book.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p.3

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 7

<sup>iv</sup> “Count your Blessings” quoted by Millard.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.