

**Wesley United Methodist Church
November 15, 2020**

**Developing an Attitude of Gratitude
“Gratefulness Leads to Great Fullness”ⁱ**

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

We never really know how we will respond to a situation until we are faced with it. We might think we know or hope that we would respond in a certain way, but our response can sometimes take us by surprise. I do believe that we can lean into a certain type of response that becomes more and more likely depending upon how we train ourselves to respond to daily events. Last week I urged us to develop an attitude of gratitude and I said that what we count increases. If we count our blessings, we become more aware of them and they seem to increase. If we count our complaints, then the number of our complaints also grows.

This past week, the mother of a long-time friend died rather unexpectedly at the age of 95. She went into the hospital during Friday night with what they expected would be a relatively easily resolved concern. By Saturday night, they were bringing her home with hospice care. By Monday morning she had died.

One of the significant parts of this is what happened on Sunday. Certainly, family gathered to say good-bye. But it was also her 77th wedding anniversary and she and her husband and family were able to spend that day together. They didn't have a big party. Obviously, it was a bittersweet day. But the overwhelming emotion was one of gratitude. They were grateful that she was able to be home with her husband and family on that day that was so important to her. They were grateful that they were able to talk with each other and be together, even as they prepared to say good-bye to the woman they loved.

Their gratitude in no way diminishes their grief. But it did allow them to approach her death with hearts that were thankful for the time they had together and especially for the gift of that last day; a day marking 77 years of life and love for her and her husband.

If they had approached this last day with anger, they would have missed out on receiving some really important blessings of that day.

This is the way it is with our lives. Our lives are a circle of receiving and giving and receiving and giving. When we open our hearts and lives to see the blessings that we have received from God, we find that our lives become more joyful and fulfilling. Did you ever try to give something to someone who wouldn't open their hands to receive it? It is impossible. It is equally impossible to give something to someone else with our hands tightly clenched.

When we open our hands and give generously to God, then we are in the open-handed position and ready to also receive blessings from God. Conversely, if we live with our fists tightly closed, keeping our resources only for ourselves, we close ourselves off from receiving the blessings that God wants to put into our hands. It is with open hands that we give to God and it is with open hands that we receive from God. We need to open our hands and give to God, only then will we also have open hands to receive from God.ⁱⁱ When we live a life of gratefulness for all the blessings God has given us, we then experience great fullness in our lives.

Dr. Robert Emmons is a psychology professor at the University of California in David, California. He specializes in the psychology of gratitude. He has studied extensively the positive effects on our health of expressing gratitude on a regular basis.ⁱⁱⁱ

In one study he asked one group of student volunteers to keep a gratitude journal for two months. At the end of the day they were to write down all the things for which they were grateful. Another randomly chosen group of students were asked to keep a complaint journal and write down all their complaints or all the negative things that had happened to them during the day.

At the end of the two months, Dr. Emmons interviewed all of the students in both groups. He summarized his findings this way, "Those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events.... Participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals (academic, interpersonal, and health based) over a two- month period compared with the subjects in the other experimental conditions."^{iv}

Kent Millard in his book “The Gratitude Path” sums it up this way. “Both groups were randomly selected. The only difference was that one group focused on expressing their gratitude for their blessings in life and the other group focused on their complaints about life. The ones who kept a gratitude journal experienced more fulfillment in life than those who simply counted all their complaints about life. The truth is that when one lives a life of gratefulness, one has great fullness and fulfillment in life. Gratefulness (one word) leads to great fullness (two words).”

Today, we heard a story Jesus told about a man going on a journey who entrusted his property to his slaves. You may well have heard this story before and we often refer to it as the “Parable of talents”. I’ve preached quite a few sermons on it over the course of the last 30 years, but I recently started to think of it in a somewhat different way. As I read it in the context of gratitude, and giving, I saw something a little different. The third servant in the story finally tells his master that he hid what had been entrusted to him because he didn’t want to lose it. He was afraid.

Fear is a powerful motivator. It has the power to imprison us, to paralyze us by the “what ifs” and the “maybe’s” that we think about. It leads to us trying to stay safe rather than taking a risk or accepting a challenge. In the end of the story, the two servants who had used their master’s resources to multiply them, then received a great deal more for them to manage. They illustrate another important truth, “Give and it will be Given to You.”

When we give to others, we also receive in many ways. Think about the times when you seen something that you knew would be perfect for someone and you just had to get it for them even if it wasn’t a specific gift giving time. Didn’t it make you feel really good simply because you were giving something to someone that you knew would make them happy or please them in some way?

We don’t give so that we receive, but it is a reality that very often when we give, we also receive. We receive joy. We receive a sense of satisfaction or pleasure. We feel good because we have done something to help another person feel good.

When we give thanks, or identify a blessing in our lives, even in the midst of something that we might otherwise find discouraging or difficult, we are also given a lift or a sign of hope. “The truth is that when we find that for which we can be thankful in

every situation, then our spirits are lifted, we count our blessing and we move away from the 'woe is me' approach to living with an attitude of gratitude.”^v

It can lift us up out of a pit of suffering and into the loving healing presence of God. God is always there to offer us love, and healing, but sometimes we have a hard time receiving that because we are so focused on our complaints or concerns that we can't even begin to see the many ways that God is reaching out to us in love.

When we are able to see and recognize one of those ways, the presence of a friend, the sun shining in the midst of our darkness, a flower in bloom, then we start to recognize more ways that God is still present with us. We start to give thanks for those small things that make a difference. For my friend and her family, being thankful that their mother was home for one day, for her anniversary, for a time for them to be able to say goodbye, helped them to recognize and receive the love and healing presence of God that was all around them.

We all go through discouraging times in life. Living in the middle of a pandemic can most definitely be a time of great discouragement. It can be a time of complaining about so many things. This is especially true as we approach Thanksgiving and Christmas and hear warnings that we may find ourselves in the middle of a complete shut-down and stay at home order. But the reality is that in the face of disappointment in life, we can choose to become bitter about what is happening, or we can choose to become better people. We really do have a choice about how we are going to respond to what is happening. And our response may very well make a difference in the response of those around us.

If we receive gifts from God – and we all do – we have a choice about whether to share them with others, to say thank you to God, or to hoard them for ourselves. If we choose to keep them only for ourselves, we begin to die spiritually. It is only when we receive and give, that we receive and give, and keep up the cycle of life that brings meaning and joy to us.

Kent Millard used the image of blood circulating throughout our body to help explain this. As he pointed out, “Our hearts receive blood from the other parts of the body and then it pumps the blood back to the other parts of the body. Our hearts are continually receiving and giving, receiving and giving. If our hearts received the blood

from other parts of the body and said, 'I will keep all the blood for myself' we would die. Our hearts are intended to receive blood and give blood back to the body, and if our hearts stopped this flow of receiving and giving we would die. In a similar way, God pours blessings into all of our lives. But sometimes we become egotistical and self-centered and want to keep all the blessing from God for ourselves. When we hold on tightly to all the gifts God gave us to share with others, we shrink into selfish, unfulfilled people."^{vi}

We give to God according to our means, out of a heart filled with gratitude and thanksgiving for all God has first given to us. When we live a life of gratefulness, we have a great fullness and fulfillment in life.

Let us pray:

God of love, you have blessed us in so many ways. Help us to open our hearts and eyes and ears so that we may see and hear the many blessings we have received. Open our hands so that we may both give and receive and fill us with an attitude of gratitude that we may live life to its fullest in your love. Amen.

ⁱ Millard, Kent "The Gratitude Path". Portions of this sermon are taken from or influenced by chapters 2 & 3 of this book.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 28

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p.31-32.

^{iv} Ibid, p. 31

^v Ibid, p. 16

^{vi} Ibid, p.29