

“IN PRAISE OF GRATITUDE”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Sunday, April 29, 2018

Scriptures: Philippians 4: 4-9 and 1 John 4: 7-21

Good morning!

Here we find ourselves. Still the season of resurrection on this Fifth Sunday in Easter, still focused on the incredible grace of a loving God, who – in one short lifetime, in one short narrative, in one short miracle of death conquered forever – our God quiets our fears and draws us close. Yet we’re in those in-between times too, and that leaves us with a bittersweet feeling. Just two weeks ago, our beloved Dr. Walton was sent off in a fine celebration; and we’re still a few weeks away from the arrival of Bob Dunham as our interim pastor. Sad a bit, maybe a little anxious, uncertain of future details, yet filled with hope.

When I looked over the lectionary reading from 1st John for this morning, I remembered one of those memory tricks I learned when I was taking the bible content exams for ordination. To give a little memory boost, I remember giving books of the bible different themes – not foolproof, for sure – but for 1st John, the theme was love. And you can’t miss it in today’s verses.

God is love. Those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them. We love because God first loved us. Those who love God, must love their brothers and sisters also. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

And I remember a funny story that helped me remember the importance of getting it right. A baker was asked to put the verse of 1st John 4:18 on a wedding cake. He forgot there was more than one book called John, and instead printed the verse from the gospel John 4:18. Now 1st John 4:18, it’s part of today’s reading – “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Fine for a wedding cake. Gospel John 4:18 on the other hand is quite different, from the story of what Jesus said to the woman at the well, and sends quite a different message on a wedding cake. Here’s the verse that went on that wedding cake: “For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.”

So for this in-between Sunday, I began to think about themes. Love, well that would be easy. Joy, a natural in these post-Easter days. Hope, Forgiveness, Faith? But my mind kept going back to these in-between times, and to the changes in store for us here at First Church, and to the memories of our 17 years with Jon. And what kept bringing me back to hope and joy and faith, what kept bringing me back to reality in a way, was one simple thought. Gratitude.

More than anything else, I was grateful for those years we had with Jon. I was grateful for the inclusive and progressive faith of this unique congregation. I was grateful for the nurturing embrace that generations of my family have felt through the decades from this First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, a mouthful of a name for a mouthful of a community.

No preacher should ignore these glimpses of direction, particularly not when thinking about a sermon, so there’s our topic for today: “In praise of gratitude.”

You know, it’s kind of a nice stereotype of Christians that when you talk about gratitude, or when you search the internet or read articles about gratitude, there’s often an assumption that it comes from a Christian point of view. For sure, there are a lot of humanist philosophies for contented living, like those ads on the subway trains. But gratitude is at the core of our Christian faith. The bible is filled with stories of God’s faithful giving thanks, in good times and in bad, in times of celebration and in times of

despair. From the Old Testament Hebrews in Egypt, living lives of slavery and hardship, they gave thanks to God, thanks for life's basic necessities, thanks for the promise of better days, thanks for deliverance. Right up to the story of Jesus, who on the night of his arrest, when he was at table with his disciples, took bread, gave thanks, and shared it with them.

I remember it always takes me a little by surprise whenever I see my longtime friend Rob Craig, previous pastor of the historic New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington DC and then later the director of the Ghost Ranch Conference Center in New Mexico. To answer the question all of us always greet each other with, almost routinely, "How are you?" Rob would respond, every single time, with a heartfelt one word answer: "Grateful." There is something there.

Of course, gratitude is a national anthem at Thanksgiving time. Even the once-a-year Christian pauses for grace at Thanksgiving dinner. There's a story of a six-year old boy who was asked to give thanks before a family dinner. All the family members bowed their heads with a smile and encouragement, and the boy began his prayer, thanking God for all his friends, naming them one by one. Then he began to thank God for Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister, Grandma, Grandpa, and all his aunts and uncles. Then he began to thank God for the food. He gave thanks for the turkey, the stuffing, the marshmallow yams, the Jello fruit salad, then went on to the cranberry sauce, the pies, the cakes, even the Cool Whip. Then he paused, and everyone waited, and waited. After a long silence, the young fellow looked up at his mother and asked, "I think I had better stop there. If I thank God for the broccoli . . . I don't think God will believe me."

So as we strive to be better Christians, as we strive to lead more fulfilling lives, as we strive to serve others, as we strive to be happy, I'm thinking that there may be something to this attitude of gratitude that's so much a part of our Reformed faith. In our day-to-day lives, maybe it's hard to choose to be happy. After all, how can we choose our attitude? But we can choose to be grateful. And it's that gratitude, giving thanks, that frees our hearts and souls, that allows us to be our best selves, that allows us to be happy. So here's my top 10 list for today, my hymn, my affirmation, in praise of gratitude.

First and foremost, there's Gratitude and Humility. At the center of our faith as Presbyterians is the belief that we are totally dependent on God. God is the one in charge, sovereign and supreme. And so we keep in the forefront of our minds the fact that we aren't the reason for our blessings, for our success; we can't take all the credit for what we have or what we achieve. If we are thankful for the blessings we do enjoy, because of the love of God and the community of others, we become less self-centered, less narcissistic. And perhaps surprisingly, our appreciation for God's having created us to be the amazing people we are, makes us appreciate our own strengths. And our self-esteem deepens, less subject to the ups and downs of daily emotions. Yes, ironically, humility makes us more confident, more open, makes us more Christian. And so we give thanks.

Next, Gratitude helps us to keep our Focus Outward. Thanking others acknowledges the acts of kindness of others. Even the books on "how to make friends and influence people" point to the credit and love you'll get from others as you thank them, making them realize how much we are grateful for what they have done. Remember the story of Jesus' thankfulness for the kindness of Mary Magdalene with the expensive ointments she lavished on his feet. And our appreciation for what others have done for us, gives us the motivation to give back, to pay it forward. We become kinder, gentler, and our focus is outward. Again, here too, it makes us better Christians.

Next, Gratitude helps us with Balance. Giving us perspective, seeing reality from several different angles. Whether it's setting priorities, or being able to realize that nothing is really binary, that life is more gray than black and white, that many factors contribute to any reality. Gratitude keeps us in community, keeps us in conversation, keeps us from polarizing people and positions. Our faith acknowledges the wisdom in

community, that discernment together, is always more productive than alone, and we are thankful for the perspectives of others as we seek out God's will for our lives.

Which brings me to Gratitude in Hardship. Gratitude gives us the means to cope with the sometimes bad cards that life deals us. And it makes us more resilient, helps us to deal with the stresses that life brings, gives us the ability to bounce back.

I have a very personal story to share with you today, but know now that it has a happy ending, so keep that in mind. I went to my annual physical a couple of months ago – now that's something that everybody should be sure to do, very important at any age. They did the regular blood tests, all was normal and fine. However, my PSA levels were slightly elevated. Yes, it could be cancer, but it could also just be due to age, could be due to a number of things. So we took it a step at a time, and we decided just to do an MRI, a prostate MRI to see if there was anything there, since there was no evidence of anything from the physical exam. So we did the MRI, which did show a very small mass, less than half a millimeter, completely contained, with no indication it had moved anywhere from exactly where it was. So the next step, well let's do a biopsy.

Now this morning, you may be becoming more expert than you really wanted, but the biopsy normally takes 12 random samples, and they took an additional two from where the mass was located. And it is an amazing thing that we did the MRI first, since none of the standard 12 showed anything other than just very low level issues, for which we would just watch and wait. But one of the targeted samples of the mass itself showed it was in fact cancer, and a very aggressive cancer, again small and contained, but still aggressive nonetheless. So, still taking it one step at a time again, all the subsequent bone scans and CT scans showed no spread anywhere else.

Now, remember I told you the end of this story is a happy one – this coming Tuesday morning I'll have a robotic, minimally invasive, less-than-an-hour-long surgery to take care of this early and contained cancer. And for those of you with a statistical craving, the 15-year survivability rates for this type of situation is 98%.

So we're talking here about being blessed: (1) that I did my annual physical; (2) that we did a PSA test; (3) that we did an MRI that found this tumor; and (4) that we live in the times we do now. Talk about gratitude. Not everyone is as fortunate as I have been, and my prayers go out to all those who suffer from this cancer.

Brian McLaren, the popular Christian author and Senior Fellow at our own Auburn Seminary here in New York, talks about his actually being thankful for a cancer crisis he had several years ago. He gives thanks for what he calls a "mortality wake-up" that reminded him of what he loves most, and allowed him to fully appreciate – and express that appreciation – for those beloved.

I tell you my story because you are my family. But I also tell it because my gratitude is great, even in the face of this difficult news. And that gratitude keeps my hopes high and my spirit optimistic. It's hard to wallow in self-pity with so much to be thankful for. I know you will keep me in your prayers, and for that too I am grateful. I'll continue to keep you posted, and it looks like I'll be able to keep you posted for the next 20 years as well.

In life, there's always something to be thankful for. I'm sure you've heard the one-liner: If you can't pay your bills, at least you can be thankful you're not one of your creditors.

Even Neil deGrasse Tyson, the director of the Hayden Planetarium at the Museum of Natural History, looks at gratitude in the face of disaster. He says we should all be thankful for the mass extinction of

species that took place when the asteroid hit the Caribbean 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs died out, allowing mammals to thrive and give rise to humanity. Without that mass extinction, we might not be here today.

Without gratitude, I don't know how any of us could make it through life's troubles. And on this Fifth Sunday in Easter, God's ultimate gift of life and love in the face of death, the hope and promise for each and every one of us, deserves our greatest thanks and praise.

So let's see where we are. Humility. Outward Focus. Balance. Resilience in Hardship.

Next, Gratitude and Contentment. When we focus on the blessings in our lives, it leaves little time for focus on what we're missing. When we appreciate the good in our lives, there's less room for envy, less space for a more materialistic theology. How many bible stories, how many parables are there that reaffirm our values of the spirit over those of the world? Our Christian faith couldn't be clearer: it's not the riches of this world that should occupy our soul's energy. Yet we can give thanks for the blessings of this life that we do enjoy and appreciate.

Even though we can't have all we want, I guess we ought to be thankful that we don't get what we deserve.

Gratitude and Friendship. Thankfulness often sets the stage for relationship, and isn't two-way thankfulness really the basis of partnership? Feeling appreciated makes continued relationship welcome. Gratitude in our own lives makes us more aware of all that it takes to succeed, makes us more willing to help others with difficult issues. As we grow in our gratitude, in our discernment of what we have to be thankful for, new friendships are forged, old friendships are deepened, barriers between us fall away.

Gratitude and Happiness. Many authors have written about how happiness is a synergy between various components of our lives, the balance between aspects like our emotional, social, personality, health, and career parts of our lives, all things that we've been talking about this morning. And in Jesus' greatest commandment, our faith provides its answer to happiness: Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. Our love arises out of the fullness of our gratitude for all God has done for us. That's what today's scripture tells us: We love because God first loved us.

So that brings me to Gratitude and Optimism. You know, if I hadn't been a cradle Presbyterian, and I heard that there was a faith whose most important concepts were things like love, hope, and gratitude, I'd probably say "sign me up!" Well, that's what Christianity is about. So there's yet another something to be grateful for, I suppose! Hope and optimism are close cousins, and it's hard when you are giving thanks for your blessings not to see life through an optimistic viewpoint.

The other day in the car, my girls were asking what I would be preaching about this Sunday. They are, all three, avid fans of movies, new releases and old classics alike, and when I gave them a quick summary, they started singing together the song from the ending scene of Monty Python's "Life of Brian" comedy, where on the crucifixion hill of ancient Jerusalem, about 20 people dying on crosses start singing together [singing and whistling] "Always look on the bright side of life." Of course I broke out laughing at the idea of my leading that chorus of whistles from up here in this pulpit — so let's try it; the whistle part is yours . . . [singing] "Always look on the bright side of life." [congregation whistles]

And finally, Gratitude and Joy. Theologian Karl Barth wrote that "Joy is the simplest form of gratitude." Our response as Christians, in gratitude for God's love, is joy. Even those early Scot and English Presbyterians back in the first half of the 1600s, in the Westminster Confession and Catechism, brought it all back to gratitude and joy. The very first statement: "Mankind's chief and highest end is to glorify

God, and to fully enjoy God forever.” Thankfulness and joy. Even as we gather here in this gothic sanctuary, clad in our puritan Calvinist black robes and white tabs, our faith is about gratitude and joy.

So in the hopes of giving you another smile of joy before I close, I wanted to tell you a story about recognizing the things we should be grateful for. A religious man is on top of a roof during a great flood. A boat comes by, and the rescuer says, “Get in, get in!” The religious man replies, “No, I have faith in God, and God will grant me a miracle.” Later the water is up to his waist and another boat comes by, and the crew tells him to get in. Again, he responds that he has faith in God, and that he will wait. With the water at chest high, he turns down a third boat that comes to rescue him, “God will grant me a miracle.” With the water at his chin and the man close to drowning, a helicopter throws down a ladder and they tell him to grab hold and climb in. Hardly audible now, gasping through the water spitting from his mouth, he again turns down help because of his faith in God.

So the man dies, and he soon arrives at the gates of heaven, with broken faith, and says to Peter, “I believed that God would grant me a miracle, and I have been let down.” St. Peter chuckles and responds, “I don’t know what you’re complaining about . . . we sent you three boats and a helicopter.”

So, in praise of gratitude, once again we get far more than we give:
 Humility. Outward Focus. Balance.
 Resilience in Hardship. Contentment. Friendship.
 Happiness. Optimism and Hope. Joy.

Not a bad bargain for just a word of thanks.

AMEN.
