

## Something about Gratitude

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Sunday, November 25, 2018

Colossians 3: 12-17/Luke 17:11-19

*Holy and Gracious God, we gather on this weekend after Thanksgiving and ask that you slow us down to a complete stop at Thanksgiving before we race off towards Christmas and the endless to-do, to-buy, and to-bake lists. Open our eyes to see the blessings right in front of us. Open our hearts to feel true gratitude and the wonder, peace, and joy it brings. Pour through me the gift of preaching this morning, that these ordinary words might become for us the life-saving Word of God. And we know that they will for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

A number of years ago at Thanksgiving, Charles Schultz ran a Peanuts comic strip that began with Lucy complaining to her brother Linus, saying, "Linus, I am as low as I have ever been. Life is a drag. It is boring; it is dull." Linus, replies, "Lucy, think of all the things you



have to be thankful for. Why don't you count your blessings?" In the next frame, Lucy looks perplexed. "What on earth do I have to be thankful for?" she asks. "I can't name one thing." Linus says, "Well, for one thing you have a little brother who loves you." Lucy is moved to tears. They hug. In the last frame, Linus utters something quite profound, for a young boy who still carries around his baby blanket: "Sometimes your greatest blessings are right in front of you." I ask you just one question this morning: Can you see the blessings right in front of you?

Gratitude and thanksgiving are mentioned throughout the Bible, coming up three times in our passage from Colossians alone. The word "thanks" occurs 73 times in the Bible, and the word "thanksgiving" is used 28 times. Psalm 23, a psalm that

says God provides our every need, is one of the best-known passages in the Bible, six verses that are repeated at life's greatest, and worst, moments. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is recited at Shabbat meals by our Jewish brothers and sisters, as well as at funeral services. In the Christian tradition, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the Lord's Prayer are the best known of all passages. Six short verses that provide comfort, beginning with, "The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Cicero, the great orator and philosopher who lived 106 BC –43 BC said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues, but the parent of all others."

But what does gratitude have to do with us today, and how can gratitude affect how we raise our children and how we live our lives? What difference does a grateful heart make? That is where we will focus our attention this morning.

I think you know that I am a big believer in mission trips. I have been at this for a while, and mission trips are at the top of the list of my favorite things I do. The harder the better. The more challenging the more compelling. A few years ago, we had our closing ceremony in Belize after spending a week sleeping on a floor, showering in cold water under a blue tarp, eating beans and rice and tortillas 21 meals in a row. One of our graduating seniors, said, "I don't think I have ever been happier, being with these kids who have nothing. And yet they have everything that is important. I have never experienced community like this before. I believe I could spend a year here in this tiny sugar cane village and be just fine. Caledonia, Belize is the happiest place on earth. Can I stay? Kibbie, what do you think? I could teach the kids English."



Knowing her mother would be calling me soon, I was careful how I chose my words. I replied, "A year in Belize would change you, that is for sure. But wouldn't you miss your phone, your friends, your life, your house, the privacy of your room?"

She thought about it long and hard and said, “We have everything we need. We have food. We have clean water to drink. All the kids sleep on mattresses on the floor or in hammocks. I could, too. This is the way life used to be, the way life is supposed to be.”

Long pause.

It started a long debate about who is happier, and I am sorry to tell you that our kids wondered if the Belizeans are much happier than we are. How could that be? The men work in the sugar cane fields; the women cook; a few women are lucky enough to have a job cleaning houses; the children run free in the village, most with no shoes on their feet. They live in one-room huts with dirt floors and corrugated steel roofs. The rain comes right in. Chickens roam the streets. No one has cars. There are no traffic lights. There is one tiny food store with fewer choices than the Mobil station in our town, and the food there has an eternal shelf life.



Most have no electricity. They get their water by pumping it by hand into a bucket. They live off the land, and they share everything, including bathrooms. Four families shared one bathroom set up with shower, toilet, and sink. It was always clean, and people were very respectful. Church is everything to them. They praise God, and clap hands, and shout it from the rooftops. They wonder why we are so somber and gloomy. “Don’t you know any upbeat, happy music,” they asked. We felt ridiculous singing “Jingle Bells,” but it was the best we could come up with.

Is the ugly truth that Belizeans from Caledonia are happy people, and we are not? Or do they just have a keener sense of gratitude for what matters most: a place to sleep, food to survive, friends and family to love?

Teddy Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Is comparison with those around us stealing our joy and gratitude in New Canaan, Connecticut? Some days, I wonder.

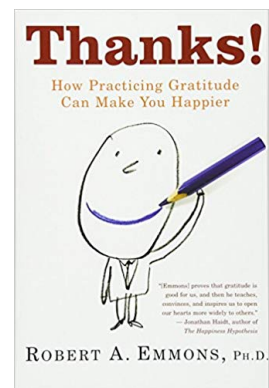


In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus heals 10 lepers and only one turns around to thank him. It is a stunning story. It begs us to ask the question, "Are we the one grateful person, or are we one of the nine who took the gift and never looked back?"

How does one become grateful? Can you cultivate a grateful heart?

**Secret #1: You can choose to be grateful.**

In his book "Thanks! Practicing Gratitude Makes You Happier," Robert Emmons says that gratitude is an attitude. After reading hundreds of accounts of gratitude to research his book, he discovered that gratitude does not depend upon life circumstances like health, wealth, or beauty. Gratitude is a choice.



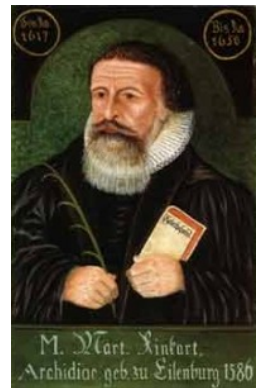
Henri Nouwen put it this way:

*Gratitude goes beyond the "mine" and "thine" and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. ... The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.*

What does it mean to say gratitude is a choice? Perhaps it means that we cannot always control the things that happen to us, but we can try to control our reaction to them. For example, if someone points out a fault, you could say thank you for pointing out the thing I could not see. I am grateful to have you in my life. (pp.17-18).

## **Secret #2: When times are tough, grateful people focus on God's presence.**

One of my favorite stories, and one I shared with you many years ago, is about the history behind our middle hymn. Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran minister who came to Eilenburg, Germany at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. The walled city became a place for fugitives, and the result was overcrowding, Bubonic Plague, and famine. During 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 40-50 funerals a day. He performed more than 4,000 funerals in that one year, including his wife's.



Can you believe these are the circumstances under which Martin Rinkhart wrote "Now Thank We All Our God"?

In my own life, I have felt God's absence and God's presence when I have walked "through the valley of the shadow of death." As my mother was dying of leukemia in 1994, I wrote a prayer journal that is so raw, so wrenching, so honest that, 24 years later, it is still hard to read. After my dad died, I had the opposite experience. I had nothing to say to God. In the tears and the anger, and in and through the silence, I look back now through the lens of two decades of experience and see God wrapped me up in a blanket and carried me through the fire. I never would have chosen this path, but I am grateful something wonderful came from that difficult time: my call to the ministry.

### Secret #3 Is Gratitude the Secret to a Longer and Happier Life?

A prevailing idea in Biblical times, classical writings, and all the way through current pop culture is that gratitude is good for your health. Oprah Winfrey is featuring an article on gratitude in her November magazine in which she talks about the gratitude journals she has kept by her bed for years, and how the first thing she says when she wakes up each day is “Thank you that I am alive; thank you that I have another day to spend.”

Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer said that “gratitude is the secret to life.” Schweitzer said in one sermon, “The greatest thing is to give thanks for everything. [The one] who has learned this knows what it means to truly live.”

I have quoted Cicero, the Bible, Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer, and Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen in this sermon, but I bet the only quote most of you will remember is this last one from our own local hero Dr. Sherman Bull. When I saw him on Wednesday,



I asked him about gratitude, and Sherm said, “Some patients are very grateful! Every time I see them in the grocery store, even years and years later, they thank me as if I saved their life for something as simple as taking out their appendix.”

I asked, “Is gratitude good for you?”

Dr. Bull said, “Without a doubt! Positive and thankful people live longer happier lives and have better success rates in recovery. They experience better mental health, have happier family lives, and enjoy more friends. It’s as simple as that.”

Listen to it again. "Is gratitude good for you?" I asked. Dr. Bull said, "Without a doubt! Positive and thankful people live longer happier lives. They experience better mental health, have happier family lives, and enjoy more friends."

As you leave this safe and sacred place today, may you be truly grateful for your many, many blessings. May you have a long and happy life, may you experience positive mental health. May you have a happy family life, and may you enjoy the love and fellowship of many friends. And may it all begin with gratitude. Amen