

NEW LIFE THROUGH GRATITUDE
Colossians 3:12-17

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
18 May 2014

It's one of the lessons all parents try to teach their children, one of the lessons most of us in this room were taught by our parents. "Say thank you". When we're dropped off at a friend's house for dinner and to spend the night, the last thing we hear is, "Be sure to tell Johnny's mother thank you." And when we're picked up the next morning, the first thing we hear is, "Did you remember to say, 'thank you'?" Before our birthday party begins, we're coached. "Now say thank you for every present whether you like it or not." Parents know that expressing thanks is a sign of good character and good manners; they want their children to look like grateful people.

One mother I know went a little further with her advice, though. At a family birthday party when she turned seven, one little girl unwrapped a gift from a relative, one of the peculiar aunts in the family. The gift was a dog's chew toy. When the party was over and the little girl was riding home with her mother, her mother hissed at her with clenched teeth: "I don't care if she'd given you a box full of manure. You say thank you and you mean it."

I'm sure we have all said "thank you" when we have not been entirely sincere. But it's never the wrong thing to do. Expressing gratitude is one of those human kindnesses that smooths out every human relationship; it is one of those practices that softens the edges between people. I can't think of an instance where saying "thank you" is ever the wrong thing to do.

Last week we talked about the gift of human community, and the particular gift of Christian community. Gratitude strengthens the bonds between us. Practicing gratitude helps us remember that we are interdependent, not independent, that none of us achieve anything by ourselves. So this morning we say “thank you” to those who have served as Sunday School teachers and other Christian Education volunteers, because without them, without their gifts of time and talent, we would not have this church. They are important threads in the fabric of our congregation.

As this school year ends, some of you who are parents might want to take a moment to express appreciation for those teachers who have made a positive difference for good in your son or daughter’s life. Teachers always hear when a parent has a complaint; they don’t always hear words of thanks. A handwritten note of heartfelt thanks, specifically thanking a teacher for his or her qualities might just be what keeps a good teacher teaching. It might be the kind of note that he or she hangs onto, keeps in a desk drawer, pulls out and looks at on difficult days. Expressing gratitude to one another reminds us of our interconnection; it helps build a healthy sense of community.

So saying thank you is good manners; we know that. Expressing thanks is good for our relationships and for our community; we understand that, too. But there is something deeper, too. Practicing gratitude shapes and molds our character and our spirituality; gratitude is a constant reminder that we are not self-sufficient, that we are dependent upon others and that we are dependent upon God.

Do you know anyone who is truly a self-made person? It’s really a contradiction in terms, an impossibility, isn’t it? None of us can make ourselves. We each are the product of our parents, at least for the gift of our genes and our upbringing. Some

people overcome tremendous adversity, some people even overcome abuse at the hands of their parents, but there are always other people along the way who have helped...grandparents, teachers, other people's parents, mentors. The more deeply we realize how many people we have to be grateful for, the more we will want to play a helpful role in the lives of others. When I realize that my accomplishments are not mine alone, I'll want to assist others in finding their gifts and their successes as well.

Consider this. Even God expresses gratitude. Isn't that part of what happened on the seventh day of creation? In one of the creation stories we find in the book of Genesis, God creates something each day, pauses at the end of that day, looks at all that has been made and says, "It is good." The sky, the sea, the plants, the animals: God takes each one in and appreciates it. Then on the seventh day, God rests. God rests from the work of creation, and God rests in order to give thanks for all of that work. God practices Sabbath, stopping, stopping in order to appreciate and give thanks. And then, in the Ten Commandments, we're asked to practice Sabbath rest ourselves. Stop working long enough to realize that the world still turns without you. Stop working long enough to appreciate all that you've accomplished. Stop working long enough to say "thank you" for the blessings which surround you.

Worship is intended to be a gift to God, the designated time when we express our thanks to God, not only for all that God has done for us, not only for all of the things that God has given us, but simply for God's presence in our lives, for God being God. We tend to think of worship as a gift to ourselves, and it is, and that's ok. It's ok to use worship as a time to re-center and balance our lives; it's ok to use worship as a spiritual boost, to receive from the words and the music and the entire experience nourishment

that will help you through the entire next week. But worship isn't only for and about us. It is a gift to God. Remembering that helps us remember that the God we worship is alive and is in relationship with us, a relationship that involves giving and taking, speaking and listening; a relationship that thrives on gratitude just as all relationships do.

Gratitude has been the focus of research recently. Physicians tell us that people who regularly express gratitude are healthier. Psychologists tell us that people who regularly express gratitude are happier. If you want to see for yourself if it's true, if you want to see how your life would change for the better if you daily found things for which to be thankful, then you will learn to pay close attention to the world around you. Gratitude and paying attention walk hand in hand. If you know that at the end of each day, you will need to write down three things for which you were grateful, well, some days it's going to take some work. You're going to run quickly through your family members and friends, your house, your most-loved possessions. What's going to be on your list then? What's going to make your list on the day your basement floods and you spend all week bailing it out? What will you write the day you find out your insurance policy doesn't cover your home for flood damage?

Those are the days you're going to have to pay close attention to the small blessings that surround you. The British writer G.K. Chesterton had a lot to say about gratitude. Here's one of his quotes: "The aim of life is appreciation; there is no sense in not appreciating things; and there is no sense in having more of them if you have less appreciation of them." When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things

for granted or take them with gratitude. He lived at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century so his words sound kind of dated but their meaning is not.

He writes that people generally think of only special occasions as opportunities for gratitude, but he sees every day that way: "You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink."

"When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?"

The poet Mary Oliver says this in one of her poems:

"My work is loving the world
learning to be astonished
rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,
which is gratitude."

She spends time in nature, observing everything from sky to grasshopper, large things and small. Her gifts of time and observation lead her to express gratitude.

Some of you are familiar with the writer Anne Lamott. She is a politically active, recovering alcoholic, dreadlock-wearing, irreverent, church-going prolific writer who has recently written a book on prayer called Help Thanks Wow. She says this about our prayers of thanksgiving. "Most of the time for me gratitude is a rush of relief that I dodged a bullet - like the highway patrol guy didn't notice me speed by or that it was a ll a dream, that I really didn't pick up a drink or appear on Oprah in underpants with my

dreadlocks dropping off my head...” She goes on to say, “Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you want to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back. The truth is this - as the Bible says - to whomever much is given, of him much will be required, and to whom much was entrusted, of him more will be asked. Jesus said it and he meant us, not the Kennedys or the Romneys - us. God’s idea of a good time is seeing us picking up litter, serving food at the soup kitchen, or calling our forgotten relatives and friends and letting them talk to us as long as they need to. God’s idea of a good time is to see us sharing what we have worked so hard to have.”

Gratitude is the practice of saying thanks, observing the Sabbath, worshiping, paying attention, serving others. It is a way of life, one that brings joy as it draws us out of our preoccupation with our selves and points our faces in the direction of others and of God. It is the most meaningful way to live.