

“Gratitude Walk”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
The Congregation of St. John's United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

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Imagine for a moment that you are a member of a small congregation lacking spiritual leadership and vision. The faith community is composed of assorted individuals, each with their own ideas as to what the church should be and the direction it should take. It is a messy situation. Yet, the congregation struggles to live out the gospel under difficult conditions.

One day, that group of believers receives a correspondence from a pastor who had once been with them. The pastor had heard of their predicament and wrote a letter offering wise counsel, teachings, and encouragement. One particular recommendation draws their attention. It suggests that no matter what the circumstances might be, good or bad, each person is to live with an attitude of gratitude. Doing so would grow their faith and save the church. How would you respond to that advice?

The state of affairs I just described was actually the situation faced by the church at Thessalonica, around 50 CE, when it received a letter from the apostle Paul.¹ And, indeed, it did tell that congregation to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NIV). At the time of Paul’s first letter, the church was suffering from various ongoing forms of persecution, although it ultimately did flourish.² Was Paul’s advice well received by the members? Might it have been a factor in the survival of the church? We don’t know. But, I can say with some confidence that modern day Christians and their churches would do well to embrace Paul’s wise recommendation of practicing gratitude.

I imagine each of us has felt gratitude or expressed it at one time or another. We can all come up with various other words for this attitude, such as thankfulness, gratefulness or appreciation. But, what is it? In general, gratitude may be understood as an emotional reaction to receiving a gift.³ That gift might consist of something material, such as a present, or nonmaterial, like praise. It is often unmerited and resulting from the actions of something or someone other than us.⁴ When we feel and express gratitude, we make a choice to acknowledge a degree of indebtedness and in many cases, the giving of the gift cannot be repaid.⁵

The Bible presents two basic views about gratitude. In the Hebrew Scriptures, gratitude is an expected response to be given in worship and everyday life because of God’s unfaltering love and faithfulness.⁶ That notion underlies this morning’s text from Jeremiah 29. Even though the elites from the Kingdom of Judah had been sent into exile in the Babylonian Empire, the prophet reminded them to be grateful to God for being alive, able to prosper, and having the Holy One’s promise that they or their descendants would one day be allowed to return to their homeland. Jeremiah told the exiles to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7, NIV).

¹ Currie, Thomas W., “1 Thessalonians 5:12-24,” *Interpretation* 60, no. 4 (2006): 446-449.

² Still, Todd D., “Paul’s Thessalonian Mission,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42, no 1 (1999): 4-16.

³ Emmons, R.A. and Crumpler, C.A., “Gratitude As A Human Strength: Appraising the Evidence,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2000): 56-69.

⁴ Emmons and McCullough, “Counting Blessings Verses Burdens,” (2003):377-389.

⁵ Emmons and Crumpler, “Gratitude As A Human Strength,” 2000.

⁶ Ibid.

The New Testament offers an understanding of gratitude as a condition of happiness that arises from a deep sense of thanks owed to God.⁷ That idea is illustrated in today's gospel reading of Luke 17:11-19. The Samaritan leper truly recognized what God did through Jesus to restore him to health and to return him to a socially acceptable status. He felt the need to praise Jesus and God because he was overjoyed about his healing. Curiously, the other nine lepers who had been cured by Jesus did not return to praise God. Might they have felt that they were owed this healing after a time of suffering? Perhaps, they did.

However, let's go back to Paul and what he said to the Thessalonians. He told them to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NIV). All circumstances, we might ask? I think most of us would have an easy time of being grateful when life is going well or something happens that frees us from a terrible or oppressive condition, like a disease. But, being grateful in a bad situation with little prospect that things will get better, now that's really difficult! Regardless, that is what Paul is saying, "all circumstances," no exceptions! One of the best stories I can think of that illustrates this happened about 75 years ago.

During World War II, Corrie and her sister Betsie had been arrested in Holland for trying to help Jews escape the Holocaust. They ended up in Ravensbruck, one of the most infamous Nazi concentration camps. Their barracks were built to hold 400 prisoners, but by the time the sisters arrived at the camp, the one-room building held more than 1,400 women.

Living conditions were insufferable. The women were housed like stacked cordwood on dirty, flea-infested straw that was strewn on wooden platforms. The fleas feasted night and day until everyone was covered in itchy, raised welts.

If it hadn't been for their Bible and the comfort the sisters were able to take from Betsie's readings, Corrie didn't know how they could have survived from day to day. If the guards had ventured into the room they would have discovered the forbidden Bible. Not only would it have been confiscated, but the consequences would have been brutal. Over and over, the two sisters wondered over the mystery of why the guards never inspected the barracks.

One morning Betsie read the Bible verse in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 that said, "Give thanks in all circumstances." She insisted that they put this into practice, feeling certain that giving thanks was the answer to their suffering. As Corrie tells the story, her sister named a litany of things they needed to thank God for—from the amazing circumstance that enabled the sisters to stay together, to the Bible she held in her hands, to the other women in the camp. But when Betsie began to thank God for the suffocating room and finally for the fleas, Corrie balked. It seemed impossible to Corrie to find anything for which to thank God in the deprivation of a concentration camp.

But Betsie insisted, reminding Corrie that God said, "in all circumstances." Corrie recalled standing in that room with all the other women, thanking God for the fleas and being certain, that for once, Betsie was wrong. Yet the prayer proved to be a turning point for the women. Their circumstances hadn't changed, but their attitude did. Betsie and Corrie began to connect with the women in a way that changed those barracks and the women imprisoned there. It wasn't until much later that Corrie discovered the reason the dreaded inspection never happened and their beloved Bible remained undiscovered. It was the very same reason she and Betsie were never stopped from having their much anticipated Bible studies. The fleas!

⁷ Ibid.

The guards refused to set foot into those barracks because of the out-of-control flea infestation. When Betsie took God at His word and thanked Him in all circumstances, she had no idea those fleas were actually a gift from God.⁸

Would you have been able to give thanks for the gift of fleas? It makes you stop and think, if not a bit itchy.

I remember when I was diagnosed with cancer nearly 22 years ago. In that dark moment, I actually felt calm and grateful. I was thankful that the cancer was found. I was appreciative that it had not yet spread. I was grateful that the doctors could treat the disease. I felt gratitude for my new wife and the support she would provide. I was thankful for the fact we had just joined St. John's and that members were ready to provide our family with emotional support and food. I was appreciative of the offers of church members to drive me to my medical appointments. And you know, all of that inspired me to give as much to others in the years that followed.

The Bible and modern science urge us to find a reason to walk in gratitude even in the worst circumstances. Why? As it turns out, research has discovered that there are some real benefits to our personal well-being, our relationships, and even our faith. Expressions of gratitude also benefit the health of our churches.

In contrast to people who do not have an attitude of gratitude, grateful individuals are overall more content, happier, and hopeful. Those persons face life with a greater degree of gusto and resolve than others. During difficult times in their lives, thankful people will more often ask for help. They see periods of adversity as opportunities for personal growth.⁹ Such individuals engage in dynamic problem-solving utilizing flexible and imaginative thinking.¹⁰ Further, grateful people experience fewer physical ailments, exercise more often, and have a better quality of sleep.¹¹

In terms of social interactions, thankful persons are better able to build friendships and form other social attachments. They tend to be outgoing and pleasant. They more easily offer assistance and emotional support to others. Consequently, such conduct builds support systems that the thankful person can draw upon in difficult times.¹²

Gratitude is also important to our faith lives. It has been found to boost spirituality.¹³ Grateful persons trust God more deeply and attend worship with greater frequency.¹⁴ In fact, if we look at the impacts of thankfulness on individuals from all angles, we will find that gratitude is the root of a faith like that of Jesus, a faith defined by a profound love of God, neighbor, and self, and a view of the world as good and kind. This faith, born from gratitude, prompts us to be more generous, more Christ-like in terms of giving of ourselves to God and others.

Here is something else to consider. The sharing of thankfulness fosters positive feelings within faith communities and increases congregational solidarity. Further, the sharing of moments of gratitude in all parts of church life helps members, particularly older persons, to cope better with issues of their everyday lives. In fact, one study suggests that congregations can serve their older members better by structuring their worship services, adult education, and other aspects of the church in such a way as to provide opportunities for seniors to recognize and express gratitude in their

⁸ This story appears on pages 8-9 of Debbie Macomber's book, *One Simple Act: Discovering the Power of Generosity* (New York: Howard Books, 2009).

⁹ Krause, N., "Religious Involvement, Gratitude, and Change in Depressive Symptoms Over Time," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 19 (2009):155-172.

¹⁰ Ibid., and Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings Verses Burdens," 2003.

¹¹ Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings Verses Burdens," 2003.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Krause, "Religious Involvement, Gratitude, and Change in Depressive Symptoms Over Time," 2009.

lives.¹⁵ Imagine that. If you express a reason you are grateful within the worship service, you will actually be helping your church and different members to face life and grow.

This Lenten season resolve to start taking a gratitude walk through all parts of your life, good and bad. In fact, make it a practice that will last the rest of the year and beyond. On a daily basis, try writing down five reasons to be grateful in a journal that you can review from time to time. Find at least one good thing to praise God or someone else for each day. Finally, if you feel like doing something nice for someone, whether they are a friend or stranger, go ahead and do it.¹⁶ If you regularly do these things you will find yourself becoming more grateful and expressing that feeling in all parts of your life. Your faith will grow and deepen in ways you never knew before.

“Give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NIV), even for those pesky fleas! Strive to walk in gratitude. God’s abundant gifts will come to you and this church, and be a blessing for all. Amen.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Macomber, *One Simple Act*, 2009.