

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
"Attitude of Gratitude"
November 21, 2010
Reverend Art Ritter

Ephesians 2:4-10

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—~~by~~ grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Deuteronomy 8:11-20

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.'¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. ¹⁹If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

There is an old story about a grandmother who took her five year old grandson for a walk on the beach. He was playing in the sand and running in and out of the waves as they made their way to shore. Suddenly a larger than usual wave broke over the shore, grabbed the small child, and took him out to sea. The grandmother was shocked and didn't know what to do. She looked up into the sky, clenched her hand into a fist and shouted, "Lord, this is unacceptable. This is unbearable. You cannot take an innocent child like that!" And just as soon as the words left her mouth, another powerful wave came upon the shore and deposited her grandson right at her feet. He was all smiles, apparently having enjoyed the unexpected water ride. But his grandmother

wasn't done with God just yet. She picked the child up in her arms, clenched her fist again and shouted to the sky, "This child had a hat!" The moral to the story: be grateful for what you have.

When I lived in Utah, I used to come back and visit my father a couple times a year, usually spending four or five days at his home. When I was there I couldn't keep my normal daily schedule. Dad loves to turn in early and I prefer to stay up late and watch television. Dad loves to get up early and head to town for a big breakfast. I prefer sleeping in and then eating a bowl of cereal and a banana. But if I planned to eat breakfast with Dad, I knew that I had to get up around six o'clock in the morning. One morning when I was with him, shoveling in my bacon and eggs in an early morning stupor, I noticed out the window of the restaurant the most beautiful sunrise that I had ever seen. There were all sorts of pink and purple and red and orange shades, highlighting the surrounding clouds with a magical tint. I told my father about it and he turned his chair around to see it. Just as quickly he went back to his breakfast saying, "It's called a sunrise. There is one of them every day. If you got up earlier you would know that."

I think of one of my favorite quotes from Emerson, "If the stars came out only once a year, everybody would stay up all night long to behold them." It seems that all of us have seen the stars so many times that we don't bother to look at them so closely. We take them for granted. We have grown accustomed to our blessings.

In the coming week we will observe the national holiday of Thanksgiving. The customs and traditions of the day are truly American. As Congregationalists we stand tall and proud as we celebrate our religious mothers and fathers-the Pilgrims. But Thanksgiving is indeed an important part of our faith. It is something more than a one-day feast on the fourth Thursday in November. The act of giving thanks requires an attitude, an attitude of gratitude, a deep appreciation for the benefits of life that we received. Gratitude is the recognition that life is a blessing and that what we have is not because of what we have done, or what we have created, but because of the grace of God.

We have been conditioned into thinking that life and its blessings are entitlements. We deserve it. We are good people. We have earned it. We work hard. I recall one of the Thanksgiving episodes of *The Simpsons* in which Bart is asked to pray as the family is gathered around the table. I don't know about you but I have found *The Simpsons* to be deeply theological at times. Anyway, Bart's prayer went like this, "Thank you God for this food which we bought with our own money and which we cooked ourselves with our own hands. Now let's eat! Amen." As usual, there is a great deal of truth in that humor. The more we think that we deserve something or the more we think that we have done something to earn reward, the less likely we are to be thankful for it.

We also have been trained to give thanks by comparison. We can be grateful because at least we are better off than someone else we know or have heard about. God has given us plenty, or at least enough, while others in distant places struggle with famine and disease, and others nearby us suffer from unemployment and foreclosure, and others whom we know are stricken with illness, grief, frustration, and despair. We can be thankful as long as life doesn't disappoint us. We can be thankful as long as we

know we are better off than others. We give thanks out of a sense of relief that at least things aren't as bad as they could be.

But true gratitude is something more. Gratitude is a perspective that considers our place in the big picture. It is the recognition that God blesses us in all things, in triumphs and disappointments, in plenty and in need, in joy and in sorrow. It is celebrating the richness in the present moment, all the while recalling that we are part of a community that exists because of the faithful nature of a merciful God.

In his letter to the church at Ephesians, Paul speaks of what it means to be spiritually alive. To be dead in spirit is to wallow in the powers of entitlement and in the search of the recognition that come with the world. To be alive is to live in the knowledge of God's grace as the source of all things. Paul's words tell us something that we should all know but tend to ignore. Satisfaction, entitlement, and comparison with others produce amnesia. When we bask in our sense of entitlement we forget the source of blessing. When we are thankful only because we are not in the same position as someone else, we are not seeing God's blessing in what we have.

The wisdom from the book of Deuteronomy was delivered to the farmers of Israel who were notorious for living a life of "split faith." On the Sabbath they would worship the God of Israel at the Temple. During the week they would offer personal sacrifice to the fertility gods, thus ensuring that they would be better off than their poor neighbors in dealing with the fates dealt by any god. The author recalled the acts of the people of Israel shortly before they entered into the Promised Land. The ceremony of the first fruits focused the farmer's attention on God's power and on the farmer's humble roots. The key word in this entire passage is "remember." Remember who led you on your journey. Remember who guided you through hardship and testing. Remember you provided so that you would not go hungry. Remember who taught you what you needed to know. When you are comfortable, satisfied, and happy-remember. When you think you have the justice and reward of the world all figured out-remember the grace of God which knows no human logic.

In a sermon by Robin Landerman Zucker, I found a poem which touched me deeply. It was entitled "Otherwise" and was written by Jane Kenyon.

I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise.

I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did work I love.

At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day.

But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.

I read where Kenyon wrote the poem upon hearing that her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Sadly, it was Kenyon and not her husband who died a year later from a fierce attack of leukemia. What struck me most about the poem is that it expressed an attitude of gratitude that viewed life from a perspective beyond entitlement and past a response to individual life events. Life could be better or could be worse, but we need to be thankful in all things regardless.

In her sermon Rev. Zucker quotes Greg Krech, a Buddhist teacher. He asks us to pursue a gratitude practice in three parts: Notice, Reflect, and Express. He says “to experience a sense of heartfelt gratitude, you must develop a practice. Without practice, gratitude is ...only an idea. You cannot become a grateful person just by thinking that you want to be grateful. Rather, you need to develop a new habit of attention- to notice the concrete ways in which the world supports you each day. And then develop a new habit of speech, expressing our gratitude to others each day.”

This is true of our relationship with God. Gratitude is important if we are to truly understand the power and presence of God each day. God wants us to be grateful and to appreciate the gifts of life, because it is in a spirit of gratitude that we can experience life in all of its fullness, and in a spirit of gratitude that we can share it with others.

Gratitude is not a thank you that merely fulfills obligation. Gratitude is empowerment to embrace life as it is given instead of waiting for life to come as we think we deserve and as we had it planned. Gratitude is an appreciation for life as it comes, not a yearning for life as we wish it to be. Gratitude is an attitude that establishes a new perspective. It recognizes the source of the gift. It takes us from the immediate and connects us with the past faithfulness and the future promise of our Creator. Gratitude helps us find our place in the whole of creation, our part in that which God desires and intends.