

Sermon for November 18, 2018 – “Learning to Give Thanks”

Texts: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34

Rev. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

I don't think that anyone is born thankful. I also don't think that thankfulness comes naturally to us if it ever comes at all. It seems to me that thankfulness is a quality one that must be fostered and nurtured. But how? How do we teach the next generation to be thankful? How do we lead ourselves in the ways of thankfulness? That seemingly simple question isn't easily answered. We've long been told to count our blessings, survey what we have, take stock of all we've been given. That's definitely worth doing but doesn't in itself prompt thankfulness mainly because thankfulness has no direct correlation to abundance. Think about it... There are people who have relatively little who're quite thankful. While there are plenty of others who have much, but never seem satisfied. In fact, every Thanksgiving, we confront an irony; the more we have the less likely we are to thank God. Continuous bounty doesn't always **create** thankfulness, sometimes it actually seems to **impede** thankfulness.

We live in a time of extraordinary abundance but are we as a people more thankful? I don't think so. In fact, I'd say that a defining characteristic of our age is that many live with an extraordinary sense of **entitlement**. We have much and for the most part have concluded that we deserve all that we have and probably more. Let me put it another way: When someone claims to be a “self-made” man or woman are they poor? With few possessions? And little earthly success? Or, are they someone who's wealthy, has a lot of stuff, and has had a great deal of success?

There's a story about a man who would boast that he was a self-made man. One day, an exasperated friend finally declared “Well, sir, that relieves God of a lot of responsibility.” True thanksgiving begins with humility, the recognition that we didn't create ourselves; that everything we are, and everything we have is a gift from God.

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* when Homer asks Bart to say grace. Bart says, “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves so, thanks for nothing.” This pretty much sums a great many people's feeling these days. The more we have the more likely we are to say, “Thanks for nothing.” After all, the implications of thanksgiving are greater when we have much. The stakes are that much higher, there's more to protect. Those of us who have much, and desire more feel the need to isolate ourselves from the realization that ultimately, we really own nothing, that everything is from God and – ultimately – is God's.

No, abundance doesn't necessarily lead to thankfulness; it can, at times, numb us. What do I mean? Well, did you ever watch a kid in a toy store around the holidays? If you have, you realize quickly that a visit to a toy store can be overwhelming for them! Not understanding the concept of money that someone has to pay for it, they frantically start pointing out everything they want which is pretty much everything! We're talking sensory overload. How many parents were glad when Toys-R-Us closed? Of course, we sometimes see this in Kroger, don't we? Kids saying, “I want this!” or “I want that!” Or just throwing stuff into the cart! Something similar happens to adults, as well. It's like the story of the fisherman and his wife. They are poor and live in a hovel by the sea. The man catches a fish that grants wishes. The wife keeps asking for bigger and better things desiring to be first king, then emperor, then pope, eventually wanting to become God only for her and her husband to find themselves where they started – poor and living in a hovel.

Never satisfied. Isn't this sometimes the way with us? We can have so many blessings we fail to appreciate any of them. Paul's urging to "give thanks in all circumstances" is a reminder. Not just to those who are experiencing hardship where blessings are few but for those who live amid bounty where the blessings are easily taken for granted. We need the reminder no less than others, and, in many ways, we may need it more. "Give thanks in all circumstances..." Whether we have little or whether we have much. You know, I'm thinking that Paul may be on to something that can help us answer our original question: How do we become thankful? How is thankfulness fostered? Well, we can start by "giving thanks in all circumstances..." by continually offering thanks. The psalmist said this, "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good His steadfast love endures forever". Notice that we're not told to be thankful but to offer thanks. Offer thanks. Bless God's name. You may not feel like doing it but do it anyway.

Jesus said, "**where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**" We all heard this right? I mean before we read it this morning? How many of you wondered if I read it right? It's okay – lots of people think the verse goes "**Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.**" It'd certainly seem to make more sense, right? I mean, most of the time our dollars follow our heart's lead. We give to what matters to us don't we? But that's **NOT** what Jesus said. It's like those fund-raising appeals from, say, public radio or TV, the message is if you like our programming, if you care at all about quality television/radio, then, send us money. And maybe get a free tote bag in the process. And we decide and either write a check or not. In other words, "if our hearts are there then, our treasure will be there also." But again, that's **NOT** what Jesus said. Jesus is speaking of a different dynamic. Give where you **want** your heart to be and then let your heart catch up. Don't just give to those things you care about, give to the things you **want** to care about. Put your **treasure**, where you want your **heart** to be. If you do, says Jesus, your heart will follow. It actually sounds weird doesn't it? But think of it this way, if you want to grow in faith you can't really just have more faith. What does that look like, anyway? I think it starts by doing by bringing an offering to God, investing your time, talents, and yes, your treasure to God. Wherever your treasure is, your heart is sure to follow.

Here as elsewhere in Scripture we're not told to **feel** a certain way but commanded to **act** a certain way. After all, feelings, unlike actions, cannot be governed by simply our will. Like, love your neighbor or your enemies. We've heard those, haven't we? My question is: How do you command a feeling? That's what love is, right? A feeling? But Jesus isn't asking us to feel a certain way toward our neighbors and our enemies. That'd be asking something that's not in our control. We can't **feel** on command. Instead, Jesus asks us to **act**. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Pray for your enemies. Give thanks to God. Don't wait until you **feel** like it. Sometimes words of thanks need to be on our lips before they can take up residence in our hearts. I think we get this.

When I was growing up, my parents would always say "Okay, Jeff, say 'thank you' to the gentleman." "What do you say to the nice lady?" They'd make me write thank you notes for each and every gift I received! How many have had that experience as kids? Who hated it? How many did that with your own kids as they were growing up? My question is...why? Was it so they'd behave in a polite manner? Maybe. I think maybe we did it because we believed, at least on some level, that giving thanks was the right thing to do and that being thankful was the right way to be whether we felt like it or not. It may begin slowly realizing that we should give thanks more often than just one Thursday in November in one big celebration and doing maybe just a little as often as we can.

There's an interesting book that is called "365 Thank You's, The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life" In it, the author, John Kralik, writes about writing a thank-you note every day for an entire year. What's interesting is that he didn't resolve to do this at a time when he was feeling particularly grateful. In fact, things weren't going too well at all. He was going through a difficult divorce. He was middle-aged, overweight and at the end of his rope. Then, one day, he got lost on a mountain hike and didn't know how to get home. By the time he found his way home he had a plan. He'd write a thank-you note each day for a year. The question was did he have anything to be grateful for? At first, he didn't think so. He began by writing notes to his family and friends. One day, he ran out of people to thank until he stopped in his regular Starbucks. The barista greeted him with a smile and said, "Hi John – your usual venti?" Kralik was blown away. He couldn't believe that in this day and age that someone cared enough to learn his name and what he drank in the morning. So, he wrote the barista a thank-you note. And so it went throughout the year, each day a thank-you note, each day a day of thanksgiving. Kralik says the experience of expressing thanks daily changed his approach to life. It even got him to church. "Through the process of writing thank-you notes," he wrote "I had developed a notion of being blessed with grace." I really like the sound of that. There's something about offering thanks that makes us whole, that can make us feel like Kralik that we're "blessed with grace." In fact, the word translated as "thanks" in the New Testament is the same word often translated as "grace." The Greek word "charis" or "grace" is interesting. It may define an act of giving or receiving. If giving – the word means "gift or unearned favor." If receiving – the word is best translated as "gratitude." We see a reflection of this double meaning in the prayers offered before a meal. Some families "say grace" while others "give thanks." It's the same word – "charis" – in both instances. It may also interest you to know that the word "charis" is also the root of the word we often use for the sacrament of communion; the word "Eucharist." But this double meaning of the word grace in the acts of giving and receiving, I like to think of as the endless echo of grace. A gift received in the same spirit in which it is given, it's all grace. We can even lose track of where it begins and ends as it all seems to flow together.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, if you live with a belief that you are blessed by grace with a mindset of thankfulness for God many gifts with, as they say, an "attitude of gratitude" you're more likely to be a whole lot happier. You may recall, I said as much a few Sundays ago. I said that there's a scientific research that proved that there's a connection between generosity and happiness and that even a commitment to be generous actually increases generosity and happiness!

So, what will we do this Thanksgiving? Where will our hearts be?

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.