

THE FULLNESS OF THANKS

Psalm 16:5-11

Nov. 22, 2009

I. Early on we learn the fullness of thanks

One of the first phrases we teach our children to say, after “mama” and “dada”, of course, is “Thank you. From our earliest days, we are taught the importance of gratitude.

When we learn a new language, one of the first phrases we learn is how to say “thank you” in that language. What are the phrases for “Thank You” that you know in other languages?

Little Emily Hill (our associate minister’s daughter) is learning to say “thank you” in her particular way. When prompted by her parents to say “thank you,” she bobs her head—a gesture of thanks from her mother’s Korean culture.

II. What is interesting to me is that the impulse for gratitude does not seem to be something we’re born with. It is something we’re taught—something we must learn.

A. One of the major battles between parents and school-aged children occurs with the writing of “thank you” notes for Christmas and birthday gifts.

It really does take a discipline to be able to convey our thanks, and even adults have difficulty making sure with the etiquette of thanksgiving. The habit of gratitude easily slips away.

Take, for example, the situation Carol found herself in. Carol decided that she wanted to do something nice for her neighbor, Mrs. Smith. She baked a pie and carried it next door. When Mrs. Smith opened her door, she was surprised to see Carol holding a pie. She exclaimed, “For me? Oh thank you so much! You are so thoughtful for doing this. Thank you! ”

Because Mrs. Smith seemed to appreciate the pie so much, Carol decided the next week to bake another one. When she took it over, Mrs. Smith opened the door and said, "Thank you so much, dear. You really are so kind."

When Carol took another pie over the next week, Mrs. Smith simply replied, "Thanks" and took the pie and closed the door. Carol took another pie over the next week and Mrs. Smith responded, "You are a day late with that pie." The following week she baked another pie. This time her neighbor said, "Try using a little more sugar, and don't bake it quite as long. The crust was a little hard. And I'd like cherry instead of apple filling next time."

The next week Carol was so busy, she was unable to bake a pie for her neighbor. When Carol passed by her house on the way to the store, Mrs. Smith looked through the window and called out, "Where's my pie?" (King Duncan, *Dynamic Preaching*, Vol. xiv, #4, Oct/Nov/Dec 1999, pg. 51. Quoting from Ken Crockett's *911 Handbook*.)

It's so easy to get used to our blessings. After enjoying them for a while, we begin to think we deserve them. Then, instead of being thankful, we start complaining. It's a process that occurs so slowly that we don't even realize it's happening. Our attitude moves from the fullness of thanks to emptiness of privilege.

B. One of our Korean Disciples pastors, Rev. Young Chang Ha, wrote a letter to the editor of our denominational magazine some years ago saying "One of the most impressive things I experienced when I first came to America many years ago as a young man was to hear people say "Thank you" wherever I went: in school, a store, a bank, a restaurant. I thought it was a beautiful custom. I remember wishing we were more like that in Korea, where I grew up as a child."

"I have lived in America for more than 40 years now. At times I wonder how some of the beautiful customs I respect and cherish so much are slowly fading away. In recent years my wife and I sent a gift to a couple for their wedding. There has been no response at all from them. Recently I conducted a funeral service for a family who were former members of our church. Several weeks have passed since the service, but there has been no response of any kind from them."

Rev. Ha then remembers how Jesus healed 10 lepers, and how only one of them returned to thank Jesus. He ponders, "Perhaps it is not unusual for us to neglect expressing our thanks." (Young Chang Ha. "Don't forget "Thank you." The Disciple. Nov., 2000, pg.36).

He's right. Gratitude is not an innate response. It must be nurtured until it becomes a habit. And it must be nurtured each and every day. Thanks-giving is a spiritual discipline.

III. Why is the spiritual discipline of Thanks-giving so important? Because when there is a scarcity of gratitude, we feel depleted, irritated, incomplete—negative energies that take away from the joy of our living.

Just think about it. When you've gone to a lot of trouble to do something for someone—buy them just that special gift, or run to open a door, or spend an hour during a busy day just listening—and there is no appreciation, then it is difficult to find the motivation to want to keep giving to others.

On the other hand, if we are not grateful receivers, if we are not able to be aware of all for which we have to be thankful, but instead spend time complaining about all the places where we are impoverished, or don't get our away, or are not attended to, how unhappy our world is,.

If you spend much time reading the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, especially Hosea and Amos, you'll notice that one of the things with which they find fault in the nation of Israel is their scarcity of thanksgiving. They continually remind their compatriots to say "thank you" to the God who had given them life—and the fullness thereof.

IV. In this morning's scripture, Psalm 16 gives us a wonderful example of a "Thank you" note to God.

The psalmist acknowledges, "You, Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need. My future is in your hands.—You are my portion and my cup—and my cup runneth over with blessing."

The psalmist recognizes that everything he has achieved in his lifetime has been as a result of gifts that God has given him. He expresses an intimacy with God's who is with him throughout his days. "I praise the Lord, because he guides me, and in the night my heart warns me."

Haven't all of us awakened in the middle of the night having worked out a solution to a problem we'd had at school, at work, in a relationship? Or perhaps a dream was significant to solving a situation that we didn't even know was bothering us. The psalmist recognizes God's gift even in the darkest of night and says "Thank you."

With that kind of an intimate relationship with God, there's a confidence and certainty he carries within him—"nothing can shake me," he writes, "and so I am thankful and glad, and I feel completely secure, because You, O Lord, protect me from the power of death, and you will not abandon the one you love."

This is where the discipline of thanksgiving is so amazing and truly goes against the inherent way of things. When the psalmist refers to the "power of death," he is referring to those things in our world that are death-like to us—despair, greed, loneliness, apathy, emotional numbness, relational dysfunction, violence. These are places that are ugly, and if we succumbed to their evil force will cause us to live as one dead, even while among the living.

It is especially through those times that if we have not developed a heart to experience the fullness of thanks, if we've lost the habit of thanksgiving, that we can give into despair. It takes a lifetime of practice to be able to find something for which to give thanks in the midst of a thankless time.

I thought about that this last week when we got the news that our own A.J. (Tex) Hilliard had been the victim of a horrendous crime. We all probably heard about it on the news, how Tex opened his front door, thinking it was his neighbor coming to by to check on him.

Instead, it turned out to be a hooded hoodlum who violently attacked Tex at knife point, beat him, tied him up, and locked him in his closet, then proceeded to rob him.

Would we be able to find anything in this event for which to be thankful? But Tex did. If you heard him on t.v., or if you read the article in the paper, Tex repeated time and time again that he thanked the Lord for watching over him. "I'm alive and I'm so thankful because that guy could have killed me," Hilliard said. "I'm just rejoicing."

How is it that Tex, like the Psalmist, can go so easily to "Thanksgiving" mode when many of us would go "Why me, God?" or move to the desire for angry retribution.

Tex gave me a clue to where his awareness of the fullness of his thanksgiving arose from when he called me yesterday and told me he was coming to church today, and he really had had enough attention. He just wanted to come and quietly worship and give thanks in his sanctuary.

I told him I had already included this piece on him—read him what I had written, and told him that I could take it out and not use it this morning. "However," I said to him, "your witness to God through the way you gave thanks is so special—it's a lesson to all of us."

When he humbly agreed to let me reflect on this moment in his life, he said, "You know, I was so fortunate to have parents who taught me to see the Lord in everything. That young man didn't have parents like I had. That's the problem with the world today—parents are not taking care of their children, teaching their children right from wrong."

Well, Tex, I give thanks today for your mother and father, who introduced you to the Lord, taught you right from wrong, but especially taught you how to live in the fullness of thanksgiving to our God. You lived out the words from our scripture this morning:

"For thou dost not give me up to Sheol or let thy godly one see the Pit.

Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.

V. How can we be like the psalmist?

It takes discipline. It means developing a habit. It starts in the morning when you wake up and anticipate the good gifts God will give you in the day ahead. It continues in the evening—before you go to sleep when you reflect on what God gave you in the day just completed.

So, like all disciplines, we just have to get started—and today's the day I invite us all to begin filling our cup with thanksgiving for the portion of God's blessing that overflows in our lives each and every day.

Henry Ward Beecher once said,

"If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it and now would it draw to itself the almost invisible particles by the mere power of attraction.

The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies, but let the thankful heart sweep through the day and as the magnet find the iron, so it will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings, only the iron in God's sand is gold!"

A symbol of thanksgiving in this country is the cornucopia that spills out the abundance of our living, signified by the fruits and vegetables that saved the earliest settlers of this land.

What saves you and me each and every day is the abundance of God's love for us, so that in our horn of plenty, our joy overflows—and even in the most difficult of situations, we can still find blessings for which to be thankful.

If this concept seems foreign to you, or if you are feeling distant from that joy, perhaps it is because you have not spent much time developing the habit of thanks-giving. And so as we prepare ourselves for our national ritual of thanks in the days ahead, I would like us to sanctify this hour on this day to making a pledge of thankfulness.

At the end of the service, we will be placing our pledge cards into the cornucopias in front of the chancel. In addition to your financial commitment to the church, I would also like for you to commit to at least one time a day, for the rest of the year, be intentional about thanking someone for something. Begin to develop an awareness for our full our thanksgiving is.