

Giving Out Of Gratitude

As I preach this sermon on gratitude, I realize for many people across our country and maybe for people you know, this year has been difficult. We have seen many weather related disasters on the television: tornados, hurricanes, floods, fires and scorching heat. Many people lost everything they worked hard for all their lives, because of these natural disasters or they may have lost family and friends. Months if not years of rebuilding is still ahead of them. Unfortunately, the life they knew before the disaster will not return for quite awhile.

For other people, talking about gratitude is difficult because they have no job. A growing number Americans, have recently lost their jobs or have not been able to find gainful employment for years. This has led to stress in their lives, marriage and family structure. The lack of employment, have led people to file for bankruptcy or they may have even lost their homes. For those people, gratitude is unlikely the last thing on their minds. They are angry at life, government agencies, mortgage and insurance companies, and maybe God. For some though, even in the midst of hardship and uncertainty gratitude is immediately part of their character and a reason to give praise to God each day.

As I think about our own surroundings in the "Lowcountry", we have plenty to be grateful for and have gratitude about. We live in a beautiful part of the south. While the summer was certainly hot, the rivers and lakes in our area, offer a good place to relax and cool down. There are plenty of opportunities and resources for recreational play. The economy does not seem as bad in this part of the nation as others. Boeing Corporation has built a manufacturing plant in North Charleston, to build a new and innovative airplane called the Dreamliner. Boeing will offer thousands of jobs for years to come. Smaller companies have already relocated or planning to build new plants in the area to meet the needs of Boeing.

The tourist and cruise industry is strong in the Lowcountry. Do you realize that a cruise ship will dock at the Charleston waterfront port over 100 times next year? We have a long and rich history in the Lowcountry that will continue to attract many a visitor or vacationer. In addition, certainly the best news of all, we had no hurricanes this year. We have plenty to be grateful about in this part of America.

Jonathan Edwards, American preacher and theologian, says in his *Treatise for Religious Affections*, that there exist two types of gratitude. One type of gratitude is natural gratitude and the other is gracious gratitude.

Natural gratitude streams out of us freely when good things happen to us. An example could be something big like receiving an unexpected tax refund in the mail or as small as someone letting you go ahead of them in the grocery store checkout lane. These occurrences in our lives require no effort on our part. They are unexpected, sometimes spontaneous acts of kindness and delight us when they happen. We can easily and naturally display emotions or behavior of gratitude when these types of good things occur in our lives. These unsolicited events, gives us energy, optimism and even melts away the concerns of life or worries of the day. We are happy that a positive occurrence has found a way into our lives. Do these unforeseen events in our lives necessarily please God - probably not? As we feel grateful for these acts, it is simply too easy. Sort of like a batter hitting a slow baseball pitch or a basketball player making the easy layup. It requires very little challenge to our faith.

Gracious gratitude is different from natural gratitude. In **Gracious Gratitude**, we express our love, devotion and commitment to God and His goodness even when we are confronted by difficult circumstances. Gracious gratitude is about not abandoning our faith and belief in God when we receive the notice that our job is terminated or the prognosis from the doctor about

our illness is not good. Is this type of Christian faith easy to accomplish or to live out daily?

For most of us the answer is no.

With gracious gratitude, it's rejoicing in God's character and love for us, knowing as St. Paul said in Romans "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹ Through our worship, prayers and ministries, we can show our gratitude to God for life itself. We express our gratitude to God explicitly, knowing God's love will not abandon us.

Last week in my sermon, I talked about faith. Gratitude, thanksgiving and praise to God, comes from faith. However, gratitude only comes from faith if we recognize that God is the gift giver. As the theologian Miroslav Volf believes, "Gratitude toward God is the corollary of faith in God. When I have faith, I affirm explicitly that I am a recipient of God's favors, and implicitly I recognize and affirm God as the giver. When I am grateful, I recognize and honor God explicitly as the giver, and I implicitly recognize and affirm myself as a recipient of God's gifts. In a way, faith and gratitude are two sides of the same coin."² In order to have unblemished gratitude, we must give credit as St. Paul did at the end of Philippians "To our God and Father be glory forever and ever."³

¹ New International Version, Zondervan 2009. (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

² Volf Miroslav, *Free Of Charge – Giving and Forgiving In A Culture Stripped Of Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, Pg. 46.

³ New International Version, Zondervan 2009. (Philippians 4:20)

Each person has wonderful gifts and talents to offer for the service of God's kingdom, the advancement of the faith community and to make the world a better place. What makes this exciting is that by the grace of God each person has gifts and talents, different as they may be; **nobody is born empty handed!!!**

Our goal in developing gratitude, is to recognize the gifts and talents we have are not our own, but given to us by God. In addition, because of God's kindness, charity and love for us we are grateful and show gratitude when and wherever possible. In the Celebration of New Ministry service, the clergy says a Collect before the Bishop asks the congregation to greet the new clergy. This is a portion of that Collect:

“Be always with me in carrying out the duties of my ministry.

In prayer, quicken my devotion; in praises, heighten my love and gratitude; in preaching, give me readiness of thought and expression; and grant that, by the clearness and brightness of your holy Word, all the world may be drawn into your blessed kingdom. All this I ask for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.”⁴

While this is a Collect for the ordained, it can be said by anyone performing ministry. It reminds us to humble ourselves and to be thankful before God. This portion of the Collect calls us back to the Creator and **helps us remember the fountain from which all blessings flow.** Above all, this collect expresses your love and gratitude to God, who gives us all things.

What are we to do with the gifts and talents that God has given us? With each talent God has given us, we are to show gratitude towards God by exercising them and not wasting what God has given us. St. Paul says, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is

⁴ Book Of Common Prayer, 1979, Pg. 563

giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”⁵ By the power of the Holy Spirit and because of our baptism, we can claim our individual ministries. Once that ministry is explicit, may your God given gift be performed at St. Thomas. The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer says this about lay ministry.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, **according to the gifts given them**, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church.⁶ With each gift received, we are to appreciate them, to be grateful for God’s gifts and not let them go to waste. We need to see everything, including life itself as a gift, and that’s why gratitude is an underlying value. Through the exercising of our ministries, with the gifts and talents God has given each of us, we are able to identify with God and grow closer to our Creator.

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus wrote much about having a grateful, happy and peaceful life. One of the things he believed was that “Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.”⁷ Gratitude is about expecting little material gains from this world, seeking those spiritual treasures that add to the presence of God in our lives. Every day in our prayers **we can** give thanks to God for life, family, friends and God’s blessed grace. **We can** show our gratitude to God in good and bad times in our lives. And because God has blessed us richly, **we can** be good stewards of the gifts God has given us and use them for the advancement of His kingdom here on earth. Amen

⁵ New International Version, Zondervan 2009. (Romans 12:6-8)

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer*, Oxford University, pg. 855.

⁷ Chittister Joan, OSB and Williams Rowan, Archbishop, *Uncommon Gratitude-Alleluia For All That Is*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2010. Pg. 29.

