

Gratitude in a Time of Trial

By Board of Deacons

Colossians 3:12-17



Gratitude. We hear that word a lot these days. It is an important word. It is emotion; it is attitude; it is action. How do we define gratitude? The word comes from the Latin, *gratus*, meaning *pleasing*. Gratitude can be defined as: Acknowledgement. Responsiveness. Appreciation. Recognition. Praise. Awareness. Or simply, an expression of thanks.

“Give thanks to God.” Over and over again, the Bible tells us to acknowledge the works of the Lord; to show our gratitude for the love and grace and mercy that we have received. During these weeks after Easter, we are called to express our gratitude to Christ, who endured death on the cross so that he could rise through resurrection, showing us the way to eternal life in the Father. Martin Luther referred to gratitude as the basic Christian attitude. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that Christians are called to be a people of thanks; it is in our DNA.

Last week, we heard Todd enumerate mom’s--capital M-O-M’s--rules: Love God above any others. Love our neighbor as Jesus loves us. Care for the most vulnerable, as Jesus cared for them. And seek justice. To those you all added: “Start each day with a grateful heart,” and “Give thanks every day.” This pandemic unquestionably has changed how we relate to God, both in the way that the church worships and in our own personal connection with Him. Psalm 22 assures us that God will show up in situations of those who are grateful and praise Him, even when the situation looks dark and dysfunctional. Gratitude is a virtue that shapes not only emotions and thoughts but also actions and deeds. We have a new appreciation of Todd and his enthusiastic, caring, and creative leadership throughout this bleak, uncertain time. And we are so grateful for all the people of BCC who continue their loving, caring ministry through phone calls, cards and notes, YouTube tutorials, errands, virtual visits, food deliveries, and prayer. God’s spirit prompts us on-- to be faithful, strong, caring--and thankful.

On this Laity Sunday we continue the theme of gratitude, offering inspiring ideas and ways to be thankful for things great and small, thoughts culled from writers, theologians, and from you. The Deacons invited members of the congregation to offer messages of gratitude to those who have been the eyes and ears and loving hands of God during this period of doubt and fear so that we may, as a body of Christ, celebrate and give thanks to all people who are doing the work of the Almighty.

Writing for National Geographic about her mother's epic journey as a young girl fleeing war-torn Russia at the end of WWII, correspondent Eve Conant reports: "As I reflect on my mother's years as a war refugee and the outcome of my family's long journey, I feel profound gratitude that I still have her. That if I dial her home in Arizona, she's still there to answer my call, even if I can't fly to her right now. Even if she has a child's fuzzy memory of dates and events, she can still remember stories."

One BCC mother expressed similar thanks for little things occurring on our own modern-day battleground: "I'm grateful I get a message from my daughter every day. Even on days when she is filling in for two absent coworkers, or working in the special COVID dialysis unit, she still will send me a few words to let me know that she is alright. Sometimes it's just a silly picture, or a terse two-word phrase. Some days, it's a photograph. For all of them I am grateful, and for my little trusty tablet that makes those messages possible, I am truly grateful."

Being grateful allows you to capture the full essence of every moment, adding a dimension of beauty and contentment: You wrote of appreciating "days with warm sunshine and beautiful blue skies, a bounty of flowers and nourishing veggies budding in the garden, my favorite trees blooming in the yard; lilacs, red bud, magnolia; the cute, furry creatures who snuggle and entertain me." Another member wrote of a similar appreciation of nature, noting, "Nature progresses through her seasons, seemingly oblivious to our anxieties. I am grateful for the continuity of those seasons, the blooming life all around--and that now I have the time to witness it in the moment."

Being grateful helps you be "in the moment" by noticing what you have and stopping to acknowledge and appreciate it. One of our Deacons shared that "it can be as simple as the taste and aroma of a favorite food: Homemade roasted butternut squash soup. With shallots. And a splash of maple syrup for that hint of sweetness. We have it frequently now; we hardly ever did pre-COVID. This basic but tasty

soup reminds me that simple can provide a grateful heart. The recipe is warm, aromatic, and filling. It's one small thing that I expect will always remind me of this "pause" in our lives, this uncertain and sometimes scary period. Smells and tastes definitely stick in long-term memory, so I find comfort that a simple food can be a bridge from the 'before' to the 'after', and for that I am truly grateful."

Music also brings delight to our hearts. In Ephesians we are told, "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything." Psalm 69, verse 30 says, "I will praise God's name in song, and glorify him with thanksgiving." We are grateful to Fimi and her yeoman efforts, still overcoming many technical obstacles, to keep us all connected through her musical ministry and our virtual. And the beautiful duet to be shared by Alan and Kathy this morning surrounds our souls with gratefulness and joy.

Being grateful has the power to change your mood, from negative to positive, from frantic to calm(er): Another of you was grateful for the pause in a previously hectic life, and the privilege to slow down and try new things, grateful for the gift of time to ponder, pray, and prepare for whatever comes next. Gratitude is also one of the best ways to keep yourself focused during a crisis. Pastor John Piper wrote in a 1985 sermon that we should "guard ourselves with gratitude"; that is, we must put on the armor of thankfulness and praise to defend ourselves from wallowing in self-pity, vanity and pettiness. He went so far as to term gratitude the "guardian of our souls."

Certainly, in this time of dread and loss and danger, gratitude is important because it helps us see a world bigger than ourselves. We can help each other grow personally or professionally. We can help those less fortunate because we see how much we have. We appreciate the talents of others. Together we can make a difference. Evangelist Billy Graham tells us that "A spirit of thankfulness is one of the most distinctive marks of a Christian whose heart is attuned to the Lord. Remember to thank God in the midst of trials and of every persecution." As many of you have indicated, we all are so grateful for the bravery and generosity of first responders, healthcare providers, shoppers and other "essential workers" who give service to others in this time of trial and need. One member among you extended that expression even further, writing: "I am grateful for the goodness of people. Strangers are being gentle and caring toward each other during this stressful time. Our cultural narrative hasn't always left room for this in the past, but I am hopeful the future will express our newfound humanity."

So, where do we go from here? How do we fashion the new reality of our lives in the midst of the seemingly endless flow of depressing news, continuing restrictions on what we can do and the apparent certainty that the uncertainty will continue? Perhaps the answer lies in letting go; in acknowledging that we can no longer exercise the total control of our existence that we crave. Perhaps the answer lies in relying on our faith rather than our hands. Perhaps the answer lies in using gratitude as our fundamental tool for good, giving thanks to God for all the good work that is happening in our world today, giving thanks to God for all the good people who are doing that good work, and giving thanks to God for our ability to appreciate the little things that we had forgotten are such a source of inspiration in our lives.

Gratitude produces deep, abiding joy because we know that God is working in us. Writer Alice Walker says “Thank you is the best prayer anyone could say. Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, and understanding.” Those sentiments are echoed in our brief concluding scripture, written by Paul in the fifth chapter of his first letter to the church in Thessalonica. May these words continue to inspire all of us to be extravagant in our expressions of gratitude to all those who do God’s work in this challenging time.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.

¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

¹⁶ Rejoice always,

¹⁷ pray continually,

¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.
Amen.