

“With Gratitude”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Colossians 3:12-17

Sunday, November 19, 2023

Pastor David Witt

## **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

Thank you, Lord, that because we are in Christ, we have become a loved, chosen, and holy people. As the scriptures teach us, help us to live this out in the details of our lives, that knowing we have been declared holy in Christ, will both motivate and drive us to change. Cause us to grow in our walk with Jesus that your Spirit will help us to love like Jesus loves. Grow us to be people who are peace-filled, word shaped, and always thankful, responding to your grace with gratitude. Change our hearts to honor Christ in all we do, that in our lives individually and together as God’s people, the world will see that you are over and in what we do. Speak to us, Lord, for we your servants are listening.

Amen.

Christian author Diana Butler Bass, an award-winning author on religion, recalls in her book, *Grateful*, “I pulled the card from the envelope, appreciatively fingering its velvety thickness. It was

formal and traditional, the sort one rarely sees anymore, with a single word embossed on the front, 'Grateful.'

I opened it and read, 'Thank you for the lovely thank-you note!'

I read it again, just to make sure. It was a thank-you note for a thank-you note. Now what?

Do you send a thank-you note for the thank-you note received for sending a thank-you note? Was there a rule for this? I have never been very good at these things. Writing the original note was hard enough; I considered it a mannerly triumph. But what happens when someone thanks you for saying thanks? Should you return thanks again? 'This could go on forever,' I sighed. I held the kind note in my hand, not knowing what was right or proper. Saying thank you can be so complicated...I have always struggled with gratitude," Butler Bass concludes. "I want to be grateful, but too often I find myself with no thanks. When I was a teenager, I tried to memorize every verse in the New Testament about thanks. It seemed the Christian sort of thing to do. Of the

dozens of mentions of gratitude in its pages, I managed to truly memorize only one from Thessalonians: 'In everything give thanks.' I proudly quoted it to a church friend. She replied, 'But that's only half the verse!' That's not a very high success rate – one-half of one verse on thanksgiving. I have tried many other attempts but gave up. By the time I received the thank-you note for my thank-you note, I had consigned myself to life as a gratitude klutz.”

And yet, Diana Butler Bass writes an entire book, less than 200 pages mind you, called *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*, primarily because she says, “Gratitude strengthens our character and moral resolve, giving each of us the possibility of living peaceably and justly. Being thankful is the very essence of what it means to be alive and to know that life abundantly.”

As I read the scriptures and as I contemplate my own relationship with the Lord, I wonder if sending a thank-you note for the thank-you note received for sending a thank-you note reflects

how God interacts with us and we interact with God? Through the rhythm of creation, we discover a good and gracious God who wants to be in relationship with what and whom he has created. Through the unconditional and forgiving love of Christ, we receive from a good and gracious God the gift of salvation. So, what are we to do but to say “thank you” to the Lord with the response of our lives? And when with gratitude we express thanks, God is honored and glorified. As poet Maya Angelou once emphasized, “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.”

When the Israelites are summoned to recall their history and their movement toward the promised land, the focus of their confessional recital is the gift of God’s grace. For them, it is indeed an act of thanksgiving more than anything else. The first fruits represent our grateful response. And the “today I declare to the Lord our God...” reflects the spiritual grace that brings the present generation together with past generations, all one in an

encounter with God. While each of us receives a “fresh today,” a “this is the day the Lord has made” gift, we are bound together with all those who precede us and all those who surround us. Deuteronomy teaches, ‘So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.’ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” So, we not only remember through our thank-offering to God, but we also renew our commitment to the community by sharing our bounty with others. Hence, we fill Thanksgiving boxes, keep a blessing box on the front lawn well-stocked, and pack monthly lunch bags for Orchard View Elementary School; we gather soups for the Souper Bowl and food items for CCAP, we work at food pantries, support Bright Futures in our schools, host WATTS, and share the abundant produce of our Roots & Shoots Garden. All seek to honor and glorify God and help neighbors, responding to God’s grace with gratitude. As author Robert Emmons says in *The Little Book of*

*Gratitude*, “Gratitude amplifies goodness, rescues us from negative emotions, and connects us to others in meaningful ways.”

The letter to the Colossians illustrates the new life you and I share in Jesus Christ, as if we are putting on new clothing, characterized by five virtues: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. While patience and forgiveness are called for, love is the highest virtue and the peace of Christ should rule over our hearts and relationships. “And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” In other words, every action should be an act of thanksgiving to God, done for the love of Christ.” I am reminded of what author A.A. Milne observed about Piglet in his Winnie the Pooh stories, ““Piglet noticed that

even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude.”

Our Reformed beliefs are rooted in the conviction that God takes the initiative, moving toward us as an act of grace, calling us, restoring us, nurturing us, feeding us, and then sending us out with gratitude as we offer thanks with our whole lives. Some have even suggested that grace and gratitude is both our theological and spiritual vision as a church. The most profound articulation of this theological and spiritual vision comes from the baptismal liturgy developed by the French Reformed Church which declares:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world: for you he lived and showed God’s love; for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, “It is accomplished”;

for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;

for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.

All this he did for you, little one, though you do not know it yet.

And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: “We love because God loved us first.”

That is grace. And what is our only appropriate response? Gratitude. Gratitude for our lives, for our treasure, for our community. Gratitude that compels us to share the love of Christ in the community and to do justice and love mercy for all God’s children. Karl Barth wrote that grace and gratitude “belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning.” If God is, in essence, grace, then we are, in essence, gratitude. You can hear grace and gratitude in the last clause in question and answer 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism: since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works? The catechism has a very helpful answer to this question that can be summarized in two words, “You don’t.” You do not have to do anything. You simply respond in faithfulness because the Spirit makes you able to, because you want to, because you are



grateful. We live in a time when the words most often associated with church are guilt and obligation. We do believe and must confess that we are guilty of sin, but that guilt is overwhelmed by the superabundance of God's grace. And gratitude puts our obligations in the service of our freedom. So we are called to allow God's grace to envelop us that we may respond boldly with a life of gratitude.

In her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, Anne Lamotte emphasizes, "Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides...when you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back." Today, this week, this season, you and I are summoned to give thanks with grateful hearts, offering ourselves and our gifts.