

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,
August 16, 2009, Proper 15, Pentecost 11
Ephesians 5:15-20, Psalm 111
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We continue our lectionary readings from Ephesians this week – we first read Paul’s description of the Christian community – how we all have a contribution to make in our common life, in our common walk of discipleship. Grounding ourselves was the focus here. Last week we heard many of Paul’s rules for living in Christ’s way – be kind, be truthful, be forgiving and that difficult one: be angry but do not sin.

Now Paul continues outlining proper behavior for good living – he tells us to be careful how we live – he’s brief and right to the point. These things we must do: be wise. Be sober. Be thankful. He tells us if we can orient our daily lives around these three, we will transform not only our lives, but the lives of our family, friends, neighbors, workplace, and church. He tells us to be careful, I’d add the word mindful - doesn’t he – and isn’t that the truth! These three things seem so simple but in reality, you and I all know they are anything but.

Today we focus on thankfulness – gratitude. After and among all the details of how we’re to live, he tells us what may be the most important – what grounds us in love – back to the very basics of Christian living: be filled with the Spirit... always and for everything giving thanks to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, doesn’t that seem too simple for words. Perhaps a little naïve as we consider all the bad news, the tragedy that surrounds us – the uncertainty of our jobs, of economic issues, of the illness of friends and family – really, we’re called to give thanks to God for everything? Sometimes that’s awfully tough, isn’t it.

But how profound a way of living it can be: my mentors for living in an attitude of gratitude today are the women of Integrity House – it’s during Bread for the Journey conversations that I hear about their struggles – all they have lost – how can they be grateful! But they truly are, for they are clearing away all the clutter, debris, of their former lives and are looking ahead in a deep hope to the future while at the same time living today in the fullest, so very thankful for the opportunity they have to become clean, healthy, and whole.

So somehow this passage from Ephesians has touched me deeply this morning – has pulled me up short in many ways - as I walk with you in our shared faith journey, I am so very grateful for our common ministry – especially in the tragic and hard times – I have come to understand that this attitude of gratitude will hold us up and enable us to look to God in the faith and hope that God’s will will be done – that God’s presence is always, always with us. I’d forgotten that for a while – I’d forgotten to be consciously grateful too often – and the readings in preparation for today have been a treasured reminder of how blessed I really am – and to feel a gratitude that encompasses all of life - life which consists both of the good times and the bad.

So how do we become grateful? Live our lives in a spirit of thanksgiving? How do we invite gratitude into our lives at all times? It's countercultural to be sure – so we have to learn it. And we learn best by hearing stories, don't we.

Fred Craddock in his book called As One Without Authority includes a sermon called “Doxology” in which he turns gratitude into a person who accompanies him throughout his day. I share with you excerpts from that sermon – the “he” in the story is the personification of gratitude.

Craddock writes, “Frankly I didn't care for him when we first met. He's not the kind of person you warm up to at first. It takes time and life before he becomes part of you – don't ever think that he comes naturally – you have to work at getting along with him. When we first met I was young – maybe 2 or 3. My mother never tired of trying to get us together and would tell me to say thank you to Uncle Henry for giving you the silver dollar. From then on, he, gratitude, was always there, pushing in, especially at dinner time. Nobody was allowed to pick up a fork and dig into the food – not before giving thanks: God is great. God is good. Let us thank God for this food.

And before bedtime, when the toys were all put away, the blanket pulled up around me, the light out – there he was: thank you God for Mommy and Daddy, and for the nice day and for everyone.

You couldn't have a party without him barging in – after the cake and the ice cream, after the packages had been torn open – thank you – thank you all very much. And I learned at a very early age that “thank you..but...” was not gratitude. Just thank you – with no buts, no strings attached.

And always, always, upon returning home, my mother would ask, did you thank your uncle for taking you to the circus today? Yes, I told Uncle Charles, but I always thought he should have been able to look at me and tell how much I enjoyed it – but no, I had to say it.

My mother would tell me, “Gratitude's part of the family.” And then Craddock tells, when I was married and began a home of my own, Gratitude came along to help us get started right. Why, I wouldn't think of serving a meal, having a party or a family reunion, or bringing in the vegetables from the garden, or even sitting on the porch in the evenings without Gratitude.

But sometimes we all forget – and my mother would tell me, that's why I'm here - to make sure that you don't. One day you won't forget; having him with you will be second nature. He'll be so much a part of you.

And as Craddock grew up, he didn't really understand it all and he came to think as do, I think all children and maybe even adults at time, he came to think that gratitude was just something to help him get more of what he wanted – two little magic words that can open any door – say thank you to the nice lady who gives you candy and she'll give you more. Say thank you to the nice God – God will give you more. But gratitude is ever so much more than that, isn't it.

Craddock continues, he says it was gratitude who helped pack my suitcase when I went off to college the first time and said, “You know, many people have brought you to this place in life.”

“Yes, I know, but I don't have the words to tell them. I don't know what to say.”

His response: that's all right. You don't have to say anything to them. They have taught you and coached you; your mother has sacrificed and saved for you – not expecting anything in return. The best way to tell them is just to do the best you can.

And if I fail? What then?

Then you give thanks for the experience and grow from it and try something else.

That's what I would have expected you to say. Let's put the Bible in the suitcase for good luck.

Yes – you'll need it where you're going.

Craddock reflects, four years in college, three in seminary, a few more in graduate school – gratitude loved it all. When I look back on those years, I can't do so without gratitude.

So there gratitude was, popping in and out of my life at odd times. I didn't invite him or cultivate his friendship, because he doesn't come naturally. You must be taught to live with Gratitude, I think. Say thank you to the nice lady they tell you when you're young. Say thank you to the nice God they teach you in church.

Then that day comes when nobody has to tell you to be grateful. You just are. Gratitude has gotten inside you. It is you.

Craddock remembers, at the birth of my first child – the first time I held that small crying baby in my arms, wondering how on earth I could be so lucky – I was so glad that I knew gratitude. And gratitude told me, don't forget me when you are doing the 3:00 feedings or pacing the floor on Saturday nights when he's 16 – don't forget he's a gift.

Craddock continues: which brings me to the strangest side of Gratitude. Paul says to us, always and for everything, give thanks. Isn't this a bit much to ask? I don't mind having gratitude there for thanksgiving dinner, or on the day we leave for the family vacation – that is, when it's the time and place. But always? Everywhere? In every situation?

Every life knows dark days when Gratitude is the last person you want to see. It has nothing to do with not liking him – it's just that there is a time and a place for everything. As good hearted and congenial as gratitude is, there are times when his presence is as out of place as a clown at a formal state dinner. Paul is going too far in his exhortation to invite gratitude always and everywhere. There are times and places that he just doesn't fit.

Like the Bible says, a time to laugh and a time to weep. A time to rejoice and a time to refrain from rejoicing. Surely there are times and places when the last word that ought to be said is thanks.

Craddock considers: Take death for instance. Grief? Yes. Anger? Hurt? Doubt? Sadness? Yes – all appropriate guests at a wake, but not gratitude. Let him come by later, when the crying is done and the wound has begun to heal. But not now, not when death holds court.

The call came in the middle of the night – most of us have experienced that heart stopping experience – the voice says, we did all we could – we are so sorry – she went very quickly.

Craddock tells of the drive to the hospital after the death of his mother – in shock, in disbelief, signing the papers, collecting the clothes, and heading back home. Anger,

hurt, grief, blaming – all rode back with me from the hospital, crowding me in the car so I could hardly drive down the icy winter streets.

Craddock walked up to the door, opened it – and there he was. Craddock burst out: don't you think it's time for you to go? We'll call you after we get back from the funeral. Don't call us. We'll call you.

And he looked Craddock straight in the eye and with a voice that mimicked mother's, said, say thank you to the nice God.

Look, I don't think you're being very funny. You are really very insensitive, gratitude – you have the poorest timing.

But he didn't listen. No, he was already getting down the family photo albums – at 2 in the morning no less – passing them around – pictures of my first steps on the lawn, my second Christmas, my first bike, my mother at my sister's wedding, my mother sending me off on my first big trip to California – my mother rocking my children, my mother on the train at Knott's Berry Farm. And someone began to laugh about the time that we were in the little town in England, and we were laughing and crying and having a warm, wonderful time. Then I understood.

Don't go, gratitude, I said. Please stay. She would want you here – I was wrong. You do belong, even here, especially now. Stay with us through the night and for all the rituals, at the funeral– we'll need you to help pick out the music and the scripture, to get through the days to come – it wouldn't be right without you.

Craddock says, that night I knew, Paul was right. It is not only possible, but even necessary, that we should always and for everything give thanks. The presence of Gratitude transforms even the darkest nights into glorious day. For a Christian, there is nowhere we go that Gratitude doesn't belong.

As the summer season draws to a close these next few weeks, let's concentrate on welcoming Gratitude more fully into our lives – when we wake up in the morning, let's thank God for all the blessings and hope of the new day. When we go to bed at night, let's thank God for the gift of the day we have lived – for all of the events – good and hard - we've experienced – when children pray at night they often make a list and say thank you aloud for so many things – let's us do the same thing. And gratitude will live in us and strengthen us for every circumstance we'll have to face.

Joyce Rupp has written a lovely poem, *A Thanksgiving Blessing* – I close by sharing its charge for living with you:

May an abundance of gratitude burst forth as you reflect upon what you have received.

May thanksgiving overflow in your heart, and often be proclaimed in your prayer.

May you gather around the table of your heart the ardent faithfulness, kindness, and goodness of each person who is true to you.

May the harvest of your good actions bring forth plentiful fruit each day.

May you discover a cache of hidden wisdom among the people and events that have brought you distress and sorrow.

May all that nourishes and resources your life bring you daily satisfaction and renewed hope.

May you slow your hurried pace of life so you can be aware of, and enjoy, what you too easily take for granted.

May you always be open, willing, and ready to share your blessings with others.

May you never forget the Generous One who loves you lavishly and unconditionally.

Let the people say: Amen.

*As One Without Authority, Fred Craddock

***A Thanksgiving Blessing* by Joyce Rupp in Out of the Ordinary