



## “Gratitude: 2. A Holy Habit”

Text: Acts 2:43-47

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

This is the most challenging sermon of the year to preach. It has nothing to do with the content. I'm not going to say anything that will make any of you want to get up and walk out. Not this week.

No, the challenge for me is to keep your attention while your stomachs call for rest. We have all eaten more breakfast than we need or deserve. But, so many people worked so hard to make so many lovely things to share that it would have been discourteous to not try a little of everything.

So, as you sit there digesting, and as the lure of sleep entices you, please do your best to fight it off. I thought of an air horn to punctuate the sermon, but I decided against it. However, I do have a cow bell up here, and I don't want to have to say, "I need more cow bell."

We're continuing to explore the theme of *gratitude* this week. And, once again, I want to call your attention to the book, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* by Diana Butler Bass. Dr. Bass has gifted the church with many insightful and helpful books in the past, but this new book is a special gift. Again, I encourage you to get a copy and begin reading and incorporating it into your lives.

Last week, we said that gratitude is an emotion. It is an unexpected response to something positive that happens to us. Gratitude is, in fact, a combination of many emotions: joy, happiness, awe, wonder, relief, appreciation, and many more. The situation we are in has much to do with our response of gratitude. And we cannot calculate - or create - gratitude. Like grits in a southern diner, "it just comes."

And, lest we think otherwise, there is much for which we can still be grateful.

In my last church was a woman whose name was Mary. Mary was one of those people who was there every time the church doors were open. It didn't matter what the occasion, what the meeting, what the class - Mary felt it was her solemn duty to be in attendance for everything. It was a blessing and a curse.

She attended every Bible study and spiritual formation course I taught. After a while, Mary would bring a tape recorder and tape everything I said. Frankly, it was a little like being in the Nixon White House. But she never used the tapes for anything nefarious and when she died I was told that they were still among her things.

It was in a class I was teaching on spiritual disciplines, that Mary spoke up and said, "These are really holy habits." Prayer, reading and studying scripture, participating in worship, generous giving, offering compassionate care - all of these are holy habits. She was absolutely correct. *Holy* means "other," as we have noted before and a *habit* is a practice we perform on a regular basis. These are "other practices" that we live out every day. The regular habits of life can include making beds, preparing meals, doing our jobs, taking out the garbage, washing the car, doing the laundry and a host of others. They are the things we need to do in order to survive as we want to survive.

But there are also those regular practices that come with being people of faith. For the most part, they make little sense to people who are outside of faith. Living out our faith in a kaleidoscope of ways means developing a set of holy habits - practices that become as regular and normal as anything else we do.

And gratitude is a holy habit.

Like all habits, gratitude is a habit that requires time to create. I have been told by those who know about such things that it normally takes about 21 days to create a pattern of habit. Others say that more significant habits can require up to 284 days. It's really about how serious you are in creating a new habit and how committed you are to seeing it through.

Which is to say that the holy habit of gratitude is not going to be created overnight. It's going to take time and energy to create this new pattern of living. It's going to take embracing both success and failure along the way. It's going to mean forgiving ourselves when our efforts fall flat and practicing a little humility when we do well.

Still, to create and integrate that holy habit of gratitude will take time and persistence and patience and resolve.

It was no different in the days of the early church. In our passage from the Acts of the Apostles that we read this morning, we see the early church beginning to grow in the holy habit of gratitude. Again, we are told:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The actions that are described in the early church are not actions that you can require, or legislate, or demand. Tell people they have to share what they have and they will dismiss you straight away.

But in the early church, a spirit of profound gratitude prevailed - that's part of that "great grace [that] was upon them all." That great grace moved them to respond with gratitude - with their own grace-filled way of caring for each other, for making the love of God real, for living out life-giving ways of responding to what God had done for them. These early believers - our ancestors in the faith - were people who, day by day, step by step, grew into the holy habit of gratitude.

How do we do that? How do we - the church of today - how do we grow into that same holy habit of gratitude?

Let's begin by recognizing that the same kinds of challenges faced by our ancestors are the challenges we will face. They lived in a world that was not hospitable to them. So do we. In our world, gratitude is a scarce commodity. Instead of being grateful for what is already ours, we live in a world that tells us to want more. Overwhelmed by the negativity of our day, we can easily convince ourselves that there is nothing for which we should be grateful.

So, we'll have to start by laying a foundation for gratitude and then build our holy habit on it.

The first step is to begin being aware of what's going on in our lives. Too often we get too busy, or too distracted, to actually notice the good things that happen to us every day. We get bogged down in the negative and fail to see the positive. We eat a meal and never pause to think of those who will not eat today, never give thanks to God for food, never consider all the people whose work makes it possible for us to have food to eat. We put on clothes and never consider that there are those who will be poorly clothed today. We take medicine to make us well and keep us well and never spare a thought to those who cannot afford the medicine they need.

When I was young, our pastor used to pray that God would make us “mindful” of things. I didn’t really understand that word or that prayer. But as I have grown older, and as I have read more Buddhist writings, I now understand that had my pastor prayed to make us “aware” of things, I would have had a much better idea of what he was talking about. Mindfulness, or awareness, or cognizance - call it what makes the most sense to you - can lead to that emotional response that we call gratitude.

Then, many have found that keeping a gratitude journal is a helpful tool in developing that holy habit. Get a little write-in journal and, at the end of the day, or at times throughout the day, simply list those moments when gratitude came to the fore. Maybe it was an unexpected kindness given by a friend. Write it down. Maybe it was a pleasant experience that was least expected. Write it down. Maybe it was the taste of something that was really good. Write it down. You don’t have to comment on it, unless you want to. The simple act of keeping a list of those moments of blessing and gratitude that pop up throughout the day can help us not only be aware of those undeserved moments of grace, but of how we respond to them.

And then, as you grow in the ability to be aware of those moments when gratitude rises in your heart, learn to offer a word of thanks. We start, of course, by offering a word of thanks to God. It doesn’t have to be flowery or ornate. Just offer a simple word of thanks to God. And then learn to offer a simple word of thanks to those who bless your life every day. Maybe you live with them, but rarely say thanks. Maybe it’s a neighbor who cares for you, looks in on you, offers a little help now and then. Maybe it’s a teacher, or an employee, or a partner, whose efforts we simply take for granted. Who are those who make your life better, richer, more lovely? Connect with them and offer a word of thanks.

In order for gratitude to become a holy habit, we need to increase our awareness of the blessings that fill our lives and we need to become more keenly aware of those moments when the emotion of gratitude manifests itself in our hearts. Don’t forget, gratitude is about emotion - its about feelings - and we can easily overlook the feelings of joy, happiness, awe, wonder, relief, and appreciation that rise, unbidden in us, in response to those moments of grace.

Melodie Beattie remind us: “Gratitude unlocked the fullness of life ... it makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.” The holy habit of gratitude will transform our lives. It really will. For now and evermore. Amen.