



“Gratitude: 3. A Group Effort”

Texts: Psalm 136 and Colossians 2:1-7

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

As some of you know, this past Wednesday, I headed up to Beloit, Wisconsin, with yet another load of Abigail's things for her new apartment. But that was not the real purpose of the trip. On Thursday, Ab and I headed further north, to Green Bay, and we went to see our Steelers play the Packers at Lambeau Stadium. As it happens, it did not turn out well for the Steelers. But even that was not all that important. My 22-year old daughter wanted to take in an NFL game with her dad - the first game for her - and we were in historic Lambeau Field. There's the basis for a whole sermon on gratitude right there. Joanna asked for the same opportunity, so we will head to Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati this fall, for that big rivalry game. I'm a lucky fellow.

But, go back to Lambeau. Colts fans can get a little vocal up at Lucas. Heaven known Steeler fans can get loud, too. But Packer fans are a different breed altogether. They don't just expect to win, they demand it. And when one of those green-jersied dudes does something positive, the place explodes. It is incredibly loud and even when you are wearing your Hines Ward jersey in the midst of them, the energy is palpable.

It is spontaneous. It is emotional. It is not calculated or manufactured. It is authentic and exuberant. And, in the Packers case, it comes from 100 years of football history. Their enthusiasm has become a habit. Little kids are in the stands and at their young age already know all of the official Packers cheers and stadium traditions, including the polka they play at the beginning of the fourth quarter.

This is nothing short of communal gratitude. A community of people, united by a common purpose, offering thanksgiving and an acknowledgment of their shared gratefulness, for the performance of their team. Even when you are a visitor to their turf, you can't help but get a little drawn into it all.

Gratitude - our theme for the month of August - is not only an individual experience. Gratitude is also a group experience. Think of all the times when you have been part of a group and you find yourself joining in with others in offering an expression of thanksgiving and gratitude. It could be a sporting event. It can also happen at a concert, or a play, or a presentation. It can happen at a parade, or a dedication, or a rally. It can happen at a graduation, or at a convocation. It can happen at the retirement of a colleague, or at a tribute, or even at a funeral. There are those times when we are part of a larger group and we join with others in a spontaneous expression of gratitude.

If you look across the history of God's people, you will find that there are many moments when we join hearts and voices in spontaneous expressions of gratitude to God. Many of the Psalms - like the 136th that we read responsively - are God's people responding to God's goodness with thanksgiving and joy. We sometimes forget that the Psalms were ancient Israel's hymn book, which means that, though we no longer have the music to which the words were set, we still have the lyrics of these ancient expressions of gratitude. In case you missed it, in our Psalm for the day, the people are celebrating God's mercy - "for the mercy of the Lord endures forever." As each historic event is recalled, you can imagine them getting more energized and more excited as they responded - "for the mercy of the Lord endures forever."

In the Letter to the Colossians, the author is fully aware that the church in Colossae is having a tough time. Questions are arising and the struggle to remain faithful is real. In the conclusion to the passage we read this morning, the author says:

"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord,
continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him
and established in the faith, just as you were taught,
abounding in thanksgiving."

This is not addressed to a single believer in Colossae. The letter is written to a church - a community - a gathering of God's people - and the instruction is clear: stay rooted and grounded in the faith that has been handed on to you and abound - overflow - with thanksgiving and gratitude.

God's people are called to be grateful people. We are called to abound in thanksgiving. We are given opportunities to express our gratitude with our fellow believers. Gratitude is part of our individual lives and an indispensable part of our life together.

And it is important to remember that gratitude cannot be manufactured or created or manipulated into being. Gratitude is an emotion - a feeling. It is spontaneous and rises within us without warning. It is a response to an unexpected happening. It overwhelms us and sweeps us up in a moment of pouring out our thanks.

The blessing in that is that when I am feeling less grateful, or when that feeling of gratitude is being hindered for some reason, your gratitude carries me through. When the news is bleak, or the days are filled with difficulties, or when a heart is broken - the rest of us can come alongside and help carry through the one who is having trouble feeling gratitude.

In earlier days in the church, there was a recognition that there were times it was really hard to be a person of faith - to live the holy habits - to practice our faith. The act was called kithing. If you were having trouble with praying, or offering charity, or whatever it might be, a member of the church would come alongside and would pray your prayers for you for a while, or offer acts of charity on your behalf, or do whatever it was that you couldn't do at that time. It seems only likely that when gratitude was difficult for one, others would find ways of expressing gratitude on their behalf.

Even in the church today, there are times when the gratitude of one, or of a few, inspires a response of gratitude in others. Back when we were doing the last major renovation of the building - adding the lobby and restrooms, redoing the Fellowship Hall, and all the rest - I was greeting after the service at the tower door. A person who regularly attended our church, but was not a member, came up to me, extended his hand, and when we shook hands, he placed something in my hand. It was paper. I thought it was a note. I stuck it in my pocket and greeted the next person. When I got home, I pulled the piece of paper from my pocket. I unfolded it to see that it was a check. Not just a check - a check for \$100,000. It was an unexpected gift toward the renovation project. I showed it to Wendy. She nearly keeled over with me. But that gift inspired a response of gratitude in others, who gave generously and we made the project budget without having to borrow any money.

When any group of people - but especially when a church - experiences a powerful moment of gratitude, things are changed. Now, unless you've been hiding something from me, most of us can't write a check for \$100,000 to the church, or to anything else. That's not who we are. But gratitude is not measured in amounts. Gratitude is measured in joy, in gladness, in celebration, in laughter, and in tears. When we come together and join together in celebrating those moments when it is crystal clear that we have encountered the unexpected blessings that come from God, we are changed and we can then change the world.

So, gratitude can be a group effort. When we are feeling a little less than grateful, we can help each other through those times. When we are feeling a little less than inspired to gratitude, we can help inspire each other to give thanks and celebrate all that God has done, is doing, and promises to do. When we live lives of gratitude, others see the difference and begin to live in gratitude too.

This is part of what it means to be “abounding in thanksgiving.” Living in gratitude, living in thankfulness, living in the acknowledgment that God has blessed us in more ways than we can count - even when the times are hard - this is what “abounding in thanksgiving” is about.

And it’s a group effort. It’s all of us celebrating God’s faithfulness and bounteousness. It’s all of us, being overwhelmed by the joy and wonder of gratitude and joining together in giving thanks. For now and evermore. Amen.



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