



“Gratitude: 1. Where It Begins”

Text: Psalm 30, 1 Timothy 1:12-17

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We’re going to spend some time this month thinking about gratitude. As we begin, I want to call your attention to the reference in the announcements about the new book by Diana Butler Bass, entitled, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. I heartily recommend this book to you because I believe that the title completely describes what the book is all about. When we learn to be grateful, to live with gratitude, to give thanks, we unleash a power that transforms our lives. Gratitude deepens and enriches the experience of living. It helps us be more what God had in mind when God breathed into our lungs the breath of life. Order in a copy of the book. It’s worth every penny.

So, where does gratitude begin? Diana Butler Bass suggests that gratitude begins with feelings. Now, that makes about 40% of the congregation nervous, because they are male and men are not all that trusting of feelings. But gratitude does begin with feelings. Something happens that brings a blessing and we feel thankful. The doctor gives us good news and we are relieved and grateful. The hard work pays off and we achieve success and we are please and glad. Gratitude is a strange combination of feelings and emotions that can include love, anxiety, relief, and gladness among many others. It is gratitude that allows us to let go of one we love who was suffering, because we are grateful for their lives and relieved that their suffering has come to an end. Gratitude begins with feelings.

According to Dr. Bass, gratitude is formed of three things. The first is situation. The situation in life matters. Secondly, gratitude is that combination of emotions that weave together to form gratitude: relief, appreciation, and release, to surprise, wonder, and awe, and even gladness and joy. Third and finally, gratitude is a typically unplanned response. We can't calculate it or fake it. These three elements show us that gratitude is the recognition of a circumstance, event, or situation that we receive as a gift - something from which we gain benefit - something that surprises us - something that we could not plan or manufacture - and we respond with strong emotions.

What is strange and wondrous about gratitude is that it is rarely the same from one experience to another. In fact, very few experiences of gratitude are exactly like other experiences of gratitude. They are unique moments - mysterious moments - extraordinary moments. They are moments that change us. They are moments when we become our best selves.

There was a time when gratitude was the law. A ruler would give a gift to the people and the people would, in turn, be expected to give back to the ruler. This is known as reciprocity. It was the norm - the idea of doing something in return for the person who does something for you. It still exists, though not in a legal sense. Someone does something nice for us and we feel the obligation to do something nice for them. Someone gives us a gift and we feel obligated to give a gift in return. The gift in return reflects our appreciation to the giver and we have been taught that it is the proper response. Ingratitude - the failure to respond - was considered a violation of the law and is still considered a violation of the social norms.

Such gratitude is a transactional gratitude. It is based on the "quid pro quo" - "I do something for you, so that you must do something for me." It has everything to do with "I have to," "I must," "I am required." It has little to do with feelings such as joy, love, or appreciation. And as we have already said, gratitude begins with feelings

It's interesting that the word *gratitude* has at its very root the word *gratia*, which is the Latin word meaning "favor, regard, pleasing quality, goodwill." It is the direct translation of the Greek word *kharis*. *Kharis* was one of the three goddesses, who were known as the *Kharites* - the Three Graces. This trio of goddesses gave the gifts of charity, beauty, joy, and festivity. They gave their gifts without discrimination and they were the embodiment of gratitude and benevolence in the ancient world.

That word *kharis*, is a word found in the pages of the New Testament. It is the word we translate as *grace*. We know that when we read or hear the word *grace*, we are being reminded of the unmerited, undeserved favor and blessing of God. Grace is God's love that is poured out to us and is given to us in ways completely beyond our control.

It is that grace that calls forth our response of gratitude. The feelings of gratitude widen our hearts - deepen our hearts - open our hearts and we have the capacity to respond with greater goodness and love. Gratitude - thankfulness - is a feeling in response to receiving gifts of every kind. If you are going to understand gratitude, you have to begin with the heart and the feelings that flow from that pulsing, mysterious place at the center of our being.

Just take a brief look at the scriptures and you'll see it. In the opening verse of the 9th Psalm, we read the words, "I will give thanks to you, Lord, with my whole heart." In the 26th Psalm, "I will raise my voice in thanksgiving and declare all your wonderful works." In the 30th Psalm that we read this morning, "I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me...Sing to the Lord, you faithful servants; give thanks for the remembrance of God's holiness."

When you look at the lesson from 1 Timothy that we read, the very first words are, "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me..." Whoever wrote the letter realizes that he was completely undeserving of receiving the mercy and grace that came to him and the words of his gratitude explode across the page. It flows from his heart with joy and thanksgiving. He is humbled by the gift he has received and he erupts in praise to God for the gift God has given him. It is so authentic, so genuine, so real. It is gratitude.

When we are honest with ourselves, when we are aware of what's going on around us, when we take a long hard and critical look at our lives, we see more evidence of gifts than we can count. Dr. Bass says that "gifts are the nature of the universe itself, given by God or the natural order. Grace reminds us that every good thing is a gift - that somehow the rising of the sun and being alive are indiscriminate daily offerings to us - and then we understand that all benefactors are also beneficiaries and all beneficiaries can be benefactors. All that we have was gifted to us all."

The world is structured as an interdependent community of nature and neighbor. We rely on each other, care for each other, work for each other, learn from each other, give to each other, receive from each other. What we have been given has been passed on to us by ancestors and forebears we will never truly know. At the heart of this worldwide interdependent community is gratitude. We care for what was handed on to us. We give gifts to one another in response.

It's not a system of "quid pro quo." We do not give because we have to. We do not receive because we deserve something. There is no grace in that.

We receive from hands - divine and human - which calls forth relief, appreciation, release, surprise, wonder, awe, and even gladness and joy. These gifts fall into our lives like pebbles in a pond and the ripples expand across the water touching everything they encounter. We recognize gifts, we receive them, and we pass them on. We all rely on these gifts. We all charge them. And the response is gratitude.

At this Table, we receive from God something we cannot earn, something we cannot deserve, something we cannot manufacture. At this Table, we receive a tangible token of God's unfailing and unending love for us. In the bread and the wine, we are reminded that God's love became visible and displayed for us a better and more authentic way to live. At this Table, we are reminded that we are not alone - that God has given us to each other to be a community of celebration, service, and gratitude. This is the Table of Thanksgiving - the Table of Gratitude.

Everything is a gift. May we be filled with gratitude - gratitude that reaches out to gift one another. For now and evermore. Amen.

1.) Grateful, pp. 20-21



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