

Embodying Gratitude

Philippians 1: 3-11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness [and justice] that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

There have been nights over the past several months where sleep has not come easy. In our house, usually around two or three a.m. we get a visitor who climbs into our bed claiming to be cold or saying they had a bad dream. In the past, I would normally doze back off after a few minutes. But these days, in the midst of COVID and the political chaos; in the midst of feeling disconnected and the civil unrest; in the midst of it all, I find myself restless. And this restlessness impacts more than our COVID hair styles and vacation plans. It's impacting our inner life as well. Now if I'm being truthful, my restlessness turns into frustration, my anxiety spikes and my patience thins with the kids, and I begin to feel trapped by all that is happening in the world...and I forget. I forget that even in these dark moments, there is still so much to be grateful for.

As St. Paul sits in his dark prison cell, isolated from his friends and the world—unsure of when he can be with his people again—he writes a letter which begins with a word of gratitude. “Every time I think of you, I give thanks to God.”

Even inside of a dark time, gratitude has a way of reframing the situation. I spoke with Jeanne this week. It has already been a couple weeks since Dick died. At her assisted living home, two employees have recently tested positive for COVID, which means the whole campus is locked down—she is not allowed to leave her room. But in speaking with her she mentions how grateful she is that the restrictions didn't happen while Dick was dying: that she got to see him and the family got to see him. And then she mentioned you: how thankful she was for the prayers and cards, and how great of a day it was as cars drove by to see her. “A day to remember,” she said. And in the season of grief and isolation you could still hear the joy in her voice.

Someone once called gratitude like having a finely tuned radar for God's grace. Because being thankful when things are going well, well that just takes paying attention; but being grateful when things are not going well, well that takes faith.

Of course, here's the reality: being thankful in life's tough spots takes a lot of intentional practice. For some of us, we did not grow up in an affirming atmosphere. And for those who did grow up in affirming households, even then practicing gratitude may not have been a normal topic around the dinner table. So we need to rewire our reactions because gratitude, just like anything else, takes a lot of discipline before it becomes embodied.

There was a story about an octogenarian who lived in a nursing home. Whenever her son would go to visit her all she would do was complain:

"The food is terrible!" "These nurses don't care about us!" "Why don't you come by and see me more often?"

Finally, the son got tired of it and he said, "Mother, from now on whenever you gripe about something, I want you to say, 'And I give thanks to God!' at the end of the sentence."

"Well that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!"

"And?" her son asked.

[sarcastically] "And I give thanks to God."

The next few times the son would go to visit her, they would practice:

"The food is awful!"

"And?"

[sarcastically] "And I give thanks to God I have food."

"You don't come around as often as you should!" the mother would snap.

"And?"

[sarcastically] "And I give thanks to God when you do visit."

Well, eight months later the staff director of the nursing home called the son asking, "What did you do to your mother? She has been smiling. She has been thanking the nursing staff and even says thank you for the food! This is NOT the same person! She has joy!"

It might take some time, but gratitude, just like anything else—learning scales on the piano or getting the into bendy positions during yoga—takes a lot of practice before it becomes embodied and natural.

So how are we going to stretch our gratitude muscles during these times? Maybe we get out a journal and write a sentence or two every day. First sentence can be a memory we carry with us we are thankful for; second sentence can be something that happened today; and when we are in a rough patch we revisit the journal. Maybe we hang a poster board in the hallway and scribble specific daily gifts until it is full. Maybe we start thanking people for small things: our partners for doing the laundry, our children for making it through another school day on Zoom, and then notice what happens in them and in us. I spoke with someone who practiced thanking grocery store clerks for wearing masks and coming to work. And the clerk's demeanor lightened

up because our gratitude is contagious, and more, it connects us. There is no doubt many of us are struggling right now, so we need some strategies that keep us connected and grateful.

So you should know, I give thanks to God for you. You have been incredible and flexible during this time. You have supported each other by mailing cards and making phone calls. I think about how you have held one another in your hearts during this hard year and I am so grateful.

Then I go through some memories about times we've had together. They are like joy-filled jewels I carry with me. Like when we first came to Trinity. How our shy daughter, who was three-year-old at the time, would always hide behind us, squeezing her parent's pant legs because she was so nervous around people she didn't know. But with you! With you, as soon as she walked through the doors, her mother and I didn't recognize who this child was, because she was talking to everyone as if you were old friends. Your warmth created a space where she didn't need a shell; where she was free to be who she was. And when I think back on all of our stories—like these and countless others—I think to myself that as your pastor I am rather spoiled. No, wait...let me reframe that...I think to myself that God must really love me.

So I give thanks to God for you. And I look forward to the day when we can be physically together again. When we can hear the choir share their song. When we can watch as our children rush to the snack table after worship. When we can share sacred stories and create more joyful memories. Until then, I pray that even in the dark times, our hearts will expand with gratitude for the community of beautiful people who carry us in their hearts. And may it be all the affirmation you need to know that God must really love you, as well.