

Growing Gratitude

Sermon 38 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 17, 2019
2 Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12

Have you ever received a gift so great that you could never repay the giver or for which you could never say, "Thank you," enough? It is truly a humbling experience. I remember the help my parents were able to provide when I went to college and when we purchased our first home. The 17 volunteers from this church who showed up to help us move into our rental house on December 27th last year, and the twenty-something who did the same on April 2, when we moved into our more permanent place. I remember shedding a few tears of humility and gratitude as I learned to accept these gifts I could never repay.

Like many of you, I learned about gratitude as a child. My parents taught me to say "please" and "thank you" early on and no sooner than I learned how to write, I wrote "thank you" cards for every gift. Over time, I learned the economy of gratitude as one of transactionary gift and response. Someone gave me something, I said "thank you." It was the polite and therefore right way to live.

Later in life I found myself sitting in my office as an Associate Pastor when a friend from the Women's Bible Study I was leading walked in with tears in her eyes. Wiping them as if she was ashamed of their presence she asked if I had a moment to chat.

"Of course!" I said, motioning for her to have a seat. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well, she began, I just... I've just been so blessed in my life and I have so much to be thankful for, and I thank God every day for all of my many blessings, but it doesn't feel like it's enough."

Some weeks later, it was Thanksgiving weekend and I was the minister on call. It was very rare to receive a call on the weekend (much less a holiday), so I was surprised when the number popped up on my phone. A woman, on the other line, was barely able to speak through her tears. "I'm so tired," she said. "I just had the worst thanksgiving ever. My family, they were all yelling at each other over politics and it just felt so hateful. I know I'm supposed to focus on all that I have to be grateful for, but I just don't feel it. I don't feel like giving thanks."

The beauty of these two encounters, especially side by side, is that they show the full range of emotion that we feel when it comes to gratitude. When life is good, when blessings abound, when we are aware of all that we have been given, we want to give thanks. When life is not so good, when there is pain, when we are suffering, when it feels like God is far away, we struggle to feel grateful... even though we know we should.

This struggle emerges out of our basic understanding of gratitude. In general, we understand it in two ways. First, an exchange or transaction. You give me something, I say “thank you.” But this understanding has its limits. Christian author, Diana Butler Bass describes pulling an envelope from her mailbox and reading a card someone sent her: “Thank you for the lovely thank-you note!”¹ This experience launched her into a quandary about when this cycle of transactionary gratitude ends? How many cycles of gift and response are appropriate before somebody concedes and lets the other have the last word of thanks?

The second way that we understand gratitude is through the lens of our individual feelings. Gratitude is an emotion. We *feel* thankful in response to the events and experiences in our lives. The problem of course occurs when, the events and experiences in our lives do not produce the warm feelings of gratitude and thankfulness.

All of us experience the back and forth of feelings of gratitude. We are eager to give God thanks when things are going well. It feels right to offer praise when life is good. And when there is pain, our thanks turns to lamentation.

If we compare the letters to the ancient churches in Thessaloniki, we find evidence of the same kind of roller coaster. The first letter from Paul gushes with gratitude.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers...We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as a word from God...

The entire letter is covered in flowery language, overflowing in thanksgiving for the followers of Christ in this ancient community. By the time the second letter is written, the situation seems to have changed. The tone of celebration and thanksgiving turns to the greeting we heard just a moment ago.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right...

In between the writing of the first and second letters, much time has passed. The recipients of the first letter believed that Jesus was returning soon and they had much to be thankful for as they awaited that joyous return, that moment in which all would be redeemed. By the time the second letter was penned, those once eager and joyous recipients had grown weary in their waiting. They now realized that their journey of faith would not be short and easy, but long and with seasons of suffering.

The ease of gratitude has become more of a spiritual discipline. The warm and fuzzy feelings of blessing and thanks seem to have waned; and now the hard work of cultivating a grateful life has begun.

Thankfully, for the Thessalonians and for us, God's economy of gratitude does not rely on feelings or experiences of blessing. Our scriptures tell the story of a God who creates out of an abundance of love and who continues to pour out that love on all of creation. Yes, our scriptures tell the story of a God who lavishes wedding guests in Cana with a new wine that tastes better than the bottles they had consumed at the beginning of the party, a God who generously and indiscriminately covers all kinds of ground with seed (in the parable of the sower) and who watches with loving curiosity to see which will take root and grow. The scriptures tell the story of a God who redeems Israel with miracles of parted seas and promised lands, who liberates the blind with miracles of spit and mud smeared across a face, who multiplies loaves and fishes to feed thousands when only one came prepared. Our sacred stories are stories of abundance who tell the tale of a God who is eager to lavish blessings upon not only the righteous, the prepared, and the hard workers but also those who just showed up, those who might not respond appropriately, and those who are utterly undeserving.

The radical thing about all of this is that in the act of indiscriminate, abundant giving, God subverts the whole economy of gratitude that relies upon momentary blessings and transactional obligation.

So, what are these gifts that God is always giving?

Well, when gratitude is an emotion, the gifts are limited to that which makes us feel a certain way. So, left in the realm of feeling, gifts are things like good grades, good health, and good luck. But beyond all of that, before all of that, God has given us the gift of who we are, that we are, in the long history of this universe the sheer fact *that* each of us has been born, that we can love, that we can grow and learn, that we have a story, that we matter to God... those are the gifts that God is spoiling us with each and every day.ⁱⁱ

Poet Marge Piercy puts it this way: "Life is the first gift, love is the second, and understanding the third."ⁱⁱⁱ

The first gift is life. Mine, yours, ours shared together. The gift is life itself, all of the joy, the love, the learning... and the sadness, the suffering, the pain. All of these and everything in between – these are part of God's greatest gift which is life itself.

From this, through this, within this, all other gifts are allowed to grow. Recognizing this, we begin to feel like the first woman crying tears of gratitude asking God how we could ever respond to this gift... how could we ever repay God for a gift so big as our whole lives?

Perhaps the key is in the greeting of the second letter to the Thessalonians. "We *must* always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters." For the gift of life, yours, mine, and ours. For the gifts that are growing among you, for love and faith that grow even in difficult times. For those constant and abundant gifts, we *must* give thanks.

What the author is describing is a spiritual practice of gratitude that stretches us beyond the emotions of appreciation that we might feel and begins to change how we act. Living gratitude means that we have accepted the gift of abundant love that God is always pouring out on us *and* that in our acceptance we do more than tell God, “thank you.” We begin to live our “thank you’s” in all that we do. Over time, our gratitude begins to look like the love of God shown in the person of Jesus. Love that is more than warm and fuzzy feelings, love that is commitment, that is a choice, that is a vow and that becomes the ground of our being, the ground from which the garden of our whole lives can grow. Gratitude and love are the response to God’s abundant gifts.

We *must* thank God for you... the Thessalonian letter begins...

We *must* thank God for you because we know no other path.

It is the only possible response because it is the only adequate response to God’s abundance. As it turns out, the woman in my office was learning the most important lesson there is to learn. There are not enough “thank you” notes, there are no words strong enough to utter the gratitude that God desires and deserves. And because our words are never enough, we must live our thanksgiving with grateful lives. Lives that enjoy the economy of abundance. Lives that echo the joy of new creation. Lives that participate in self-giving love, because truly, there is so much to be grateful for.

ⁱ Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful*. xi.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marge Piercy. *Gone to Soldiers*, reprint ed. Retrieved from Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*. 43.