

## Gift and Grace

### Sermon 202 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 5, 2023

#### Luke 10:25-37

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

Diana was showering gratitude all over - like the reckless sower Jesus talked about, the one who cast seeds out on all kinds of ground.

She was shouting it out to her dog, her neighbors, her husband, and God all at the same time. And as she shouted, the feelings of fear and grief that occupied her mind and body these last four days were overwhelmed by a far more powerful thing: *gratitude*.<sup>1</sup>

It had been four days of panic as Diana and her family searched for Rembrandt, their beloved dog. On one of the hottest days of the year, sweet old Rembrandt had discovered a hole in the backyard fence and escaped without the family noticing until it was much too late.

Their stress mounted as meteorologists predicted a significant heat wave and urged everyone - especially the elderly - to remain indoors where it would be cool. Rembrandt had aged quite a bit in the ten years since Diana's family picked him up from the shelter, and his body was beginning to slow down. This was not the time for a grand adventure or disappearing act. So while the rest of Memphis was hunkered down indoors with AC's blazing, Diana's family was walking the streets in the sweltering heat, praying that Rembrandt would be found.

One day a stranger called - he'd seen one of the “Lost Dog” posters the family had put up. They'd seen Rembrandt, taken him in for a day and fed him before he ran off again. Then a neighbor reached out saying they'd seen him “stumbling down a street, suffering from dehydration. [Diana's] husband drove to their house, picked up the dog, and immediately took him to the vet [while Diana] stayed home and kept a worried vigil by the front window. [It seemed like forever but] finally, the car pulled up. [She] raced outside, threw the door open, and grabbed Rembrandt from the seat, nearly crushing him in [her] embrace. His hair was matted and covered with thorns and brambles. He was beat up and exhausted, but that did not matter. His eyes told the truth - he was glad to be home. ... What was lost had been found.”<sup>2</sup> And all Diana could say was, “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

Though the words seemed to flow freely, effortlessly, almost recklessly, Diana knew somewhere deep down that the words barely even got close to describing the gratitude she felt for the gift she'd received. Rembrandt was alive - thanks to the charity of strangers

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful*. Loc. 326 of 3301

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*. Loc. 314 of 3301

and neighbors. Rembrandt was alive!!! And Rembrandt was home. How could she ever repay the stranger who took in the poor dog, fed him, and kept him safe until he ran away again? How could she ever repay the neighbor who spotted the dog and reported his location while Diana's husband got in the car?

What could she do, say, give back?

The truth is, there wasn't a gift big enough to compare to the one she'd been given. Have you ever been given a gift like this? A gift so big or so generous or so meaningful that you could never possibly repay it?

Since ancient times, people have asked the question:

*How could I ever repay ... ?*

And we ask this question because gratitude has long been understood as an essential part of a system of reciprocity. A transactionary existence that must remain balanced to avoid dependency, indebtedness, and inescapable vulnerability.

When a gift was (or is) given, the beneficiary is obliged to give something in return - a thank you gift - to balance the scales and get the relationship back on even footing. The ancient philosophers, Aristotle and Seneca, speculated about gratitude as a divine virtue while ingratitude was a severe violation of social norms. In their world, gratitude was more than personal obligation and ingratitude more than just bad manners. Gratitude as transaction was the foundation of ancient society. Gratitude was not a feeling, it was the law.

In the 1700s we began to think differently about the place of gratitude in the public sector. Having experienced the failures of ancient monarchical systems, and the future of liberalism, democracy, capitalism, and individualism still unwritten, John Locke argued that public life and politics should be separated from gratitude and all its gifts, favors, and quid pro quo.<sup>3</sup>

But gratitude did not disappear despite its banishment from the political realm it merely moved into the private life, where it became "a soft virtue,"<sup>4</sup> meaning a sentiment, an emotion, and something to be shared primarily within the context of neighborliness and friendship. In other words: Gratitude was domesticated.

In recent years we have discovered the problems with trying to box in gratitude as either public law or private emotion. Some now argue that gratitude is a discipline and should be removed from the emotional realm altogether, while others respond that to remove it from the emotional realm is to deny its origins which are found deep in the heart of humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> Loc. 398.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. 412.

Gratitude lives in us... in our heart, in our gut, in our very existence. The word itself - gratitude - is akin to grace. The two words both come from the Latin root *gratia* which in Greek is *kharis*. *Kharis* was the name of a Greek goddess who offered gifts of charity, beauty, joy, festivity, and song. But in addition to being the name of such a goddess, the root words also has great theological significance. *Gratia* and *Kharis* mean “unmerited favor,” in other words, a gift we could never earn, a gift for which there is no comparable, “thank you.”

Gratitude was never meant to be a transaction to balance a scale. Gratitude is the word that *attempts* to describe our response to a gift of grace.

Of course no single word could ever adequately summarize the experience of receiving that kind of gift. Which is why we tell stories, sing songs, and share testimonies of such encounters. We try our best to find examples to convey the way grace feels when we are the recipients of it and the way gratitude feels when we live our lives in it.

That’s what Diana did when she belted out “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” after receiving a gift too good to imagine. Rembrandt, her beloved dog, returned home.

And that must be what the wounded traveler in today’s Gospel lesson said when he woke up in that ancient hospital room and realized that his life had been saved, and his bill had been paid. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” He surely shouted as he began to look around for the person responsible for this tremendous gift! The person to whom he owed his very life. How could he ever thank him enough?

You know, language is a funny thing. Especially in the Bible. If we pay attention to the parable we’ll notice a pattern with the words. A man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho and gets beaten up and robbed. A priest goes down that same road, saw him, and passed by on the other side. A Levite also saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, saw him, and whereas the others passed by on the other side, the Samaritan saw him and felt compassion.

Compassion. A word used only a handful of times in the New Testament. Most of the time it is used to describe the way Jesus felt when he looked upon the crowds or an individual who had come to him in search of healing. Only one other time besides this one, is this word used to describe someone other than Jesus, in the Gospels. Want to venture a guess where that is? The return of the Prodigal. When the prodigal son returns home and the father sees him on the break of the horizon, the father “has compassion” upon him.

Compassion - like gratitude - like grace - is another one of those words that attempts to describe something uncontained by our heads or our hearts... it is bigger than our politics and our close personal relationships, compassion - like gratitude - resides in our gut and is a part of our whole existence.

Could it be that compassion is an expression of gratitude, a posture of life, a way of being that is a perpetual response to the magnitude grace that we have receive from God?

Could it be that the Samaritan knew what to do because he'd also been the recipient of a gift too large to ever repay and so rather than putting himself on an overwhelming, all-consuming, transactional kind of grace-repayment-plan... maybe he just decided to re-orient his life altogether, offering that same measure of grace to everyone in every time and every place? This... his expression of gratitude.

What if the Samaritan already knew what the Swiss theologian Karl Barth would say thousands of years later, that: "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice, an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder, lightning."<sup>5</sup>

Grace and gratitude belong together and if we want to be grateful people, we might begin by offering grace to one another. Grace to our friends, grace to our family members, grace to our enemies, and grace to our political foes. Grace to our colleagues and grace to our teammates. Grace to those who really deserve it, and grace to those who never ever earned it. Grace, scattered around, tossed about, generously, extravagantly, maybe even recklessly, and us, following the example of the sower who scattered the seeds on all kinds of soil - as if seeds had no cost at all.

Grace... which together with gratitude begins to form a different kind of equation. One that isn't concerned with a balanced scale between gift and giver. But instead offers a whole life of grateful living which widens our hearts toward greater goodness and love.

Truth is we are *all* the beneficiaries of a gift that we could never repay.

The gift of life itself.

The gift of God's love.

The gift of salvation.

These three meet us at the table time and time again, reminding us that no matter what we say or do, we can never earn our place in God's heart. No, it is a gift of greatest magnitude. A gift of grace, too big to ever repay. So we come to this table, the Lord's table, once again today. Remembering Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection - all a gift freely given because *God so LOVED the world*. And as we draw near to this table, let us not forget that the word for this very practice, *eucharist*, also shares ancient linguistic roots with both grace and gratitude. Eucharist means: *We give thanks*.

And so as we prepare to receive this incredible gift once more, let us remember that there are no words sufficient, and there is nothing big enough we can do to say thanks, nothing short of offering our whole lives in response will do.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* (p#)

Let us pray:

Gracious God we give you thanks for the extravagant love that you have shown to us in more ways than we can number.

As we prepare to dine at your table once more,  
we also give thanks for the knowledge that you meet us here,  
as we are, where we are,  
And you call us deeper into your love,  
Reminding us that your gifts of love and grace  
are never a transactional equation...  
but gifts that are wholly and completely unconditional.

Today as we draw near, we ask that you bless this bread and this cup.  
Allow them to nourish us body and soul,  
Empowering us to live grateful lives in response to your grace which is so wild, so large,  
and so free  
that it is available to anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

Call us to go about our lives - from this moment on -  
seeing others with compassion,  
seeking love in all that we do,  
bringing about justice wherever we can,  
and embodying your grace every moment of our lives.

Pour out your Spirit upon these gifts of food and drink,  
that by the sharing of this meal,  
that in the receiving of these gifts,  
we might be transformed into the body of Christ, giving our whole lives as an offering to  
you.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ,  
our Savior and our Redeemer.

Amen.