

Learning to Give Thanks

I Thessalonians 5:16-18; Matthew 6:19-21

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 1) 2023

Tithe Sunday

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I think it is fair to say that most of us had the habit of saying “thank you” drummed into us from infancy. Every time someone handed us something, especially a gift, we were brought up to say, “Say thank you,” over and over again, and eventually, “Now, what do you say?” To which, if we were good children, would mumble, “Thank you.” When the day came that we received a gift and spontaneously responded, with no prompting, “Thank you,” it was considered a threshold day. A developmental day of becoming a full-blown human child, and no longer a baby or toddler.

To say, a child has to be “brought up” to say thanks, says two things. First, learning to give thanks is not natural. It has to be taught and learned. Studies support this. Fear, happiness, sadness, anger, and so on are all emotions that psychologists believe are natural to being a human being. For one reason or another, they might be skewed, and we need help in learning how to appropriately express them, but the assumption is that most all people know these emotions naturally. Not so with gratitude. No one is born thankful. It must be taught. Gratitude is not an emotion. It is something we do. Something we learn. Second, for a child to be “brought up” is passive voice meaning they are not brought up by themselves. Someone else must do the bringing up. Giving thanks is a learned behavior.

On an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Bart is asked to offer thanks at a family meal, he says, “Dear God, we bought all of this stuff with our own money, so thanks for nothing.”

Bart Simpson’s prayer seems to be the mark of our age. While we might think that the more we have, the more grateful and generous we might be, the opposite seems to be true. A study done by Michael Emerson, sociologist at the University of Illinois Chicago, shows that America’s biggest givers—as a percentage of their income—are its lowest income earners. Americans earning less than \$10,000 gave 2.3 percent of their income to churches. Those who earn \$70,000 or more gave only 1.2 percent.

At the same time, the amount of money we have appears to be a negative influence on generosity. Church giving as a percentage of income was higher during the early years of the Great Depression—around 3.5 percent—than at any point since. When income went up, we began to give less (see Michael Emerson, *Passing the Plate*).

Oftentimes, it seems that the more we have there is an increased need to protect it or become numbed to it. Give a person one square meal a day, and he or she will find time to give thanks. But give a person an opulent feast every night, and it won’t be long before he or she begins to quibble over whether the asparagus is properly prepared or not.

I read a story recently of an airline flight that lost its Wi-Fi connection for three minutes. Three minutes! And in less than three minutes people were yelling at the flight attendants in anger.

The Apostle Paul tells us this morning, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (I Thess. 5:16-18). Notice Paul does not say, “give thanks for all circumstances.” He says, “give thanks in all circumstances.” Whether we have much or little, Paul says we are to give thanks.

So how do we learn to do that? If you go back and read the Psalms, time and time again we are commanded to give thanks. For example, Psalm 136 says “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 136:1-3). Notice the Psalmist does not tell us to be thankful, but to give thanks. You may not feel like doing it, but you are to do it anyway.

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). This is one of those verses in the Bible we have likely heard often enough to be familiar with, but it is also one of those we need to read carefully. We might read it to say, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.” That would make sense to us because much of the time our dollars follow our hearts. We give to what matters to us.

One of the first lessons in fundraising is to show people why whatever you’re doing and raising money for matters. So, PBS or NPR will tell us ways they make a difference, give us important information, and so on. Or our alma mater will tell us of the big difference they are making in this world. Charities will give testimonials of people’s lives being touched. Here at Austin Heights, we talk about what we try to do in this town, of teaching the faith to our children, of our long history of anti-racism, of speaking out about climate change, and being a

welcoming and affirming LGBTQ congregation. All of that is good. But it is based upon the premise, we give to what matters to us, so non-profit fundraising is based upon convincing us that it matters. As I said, this is good.

But this is not what Jesus said.

Jesus is teaching us a different way. Give and spend where you want your heart to be, and then let your heart catch up. Don't just give to those things you care about. Give to the things you want to care about. Ask yourself, "If I were the sort of person I long to be, what would I do? How would I spend my money? Then do what you would do if you were that sort of person. Put your treasure where you want your heart to be. If you do, says Jesus, your heart will go there. If you want to be the kind of person who cares more about the kind of car you drive, buy an expensive one. If you want to be a person everybody whispers about how you're the best dressed person in town, then buy very nice clothes. But if you want to grow in your faith, bring an offering to God.

Jesus' teaching is at the heart of discipleship training and the scriptural tradition. We are not taught to feel a certain way and then let our actions follow. We are not even taught to get our beliefs in order, then we'll act accordingly. Jesus is telling us to act our way into a different way of feeling and being. We do what Jesus says, and we will begin to feel and think in the same way.

Pray for your enemies, go the second mile, love your neighbor as yourself, give thanks in all circumstances. Don't wait until you feel like it.

This is the irony of the life of a disciple. It is by continually giving thanks that we come to be thankful. Whether our parents knew this or not – perhaps they were just wanting us to be polite and well-behaved – but by learning over and over

again to say thank you we come to be more thankful people. And by learning over and over again to bring your tithes and offerings to God, your heart will follow.

You've heard me say that I tend to be a worrier and an "awfulizer." And these days, there is plenty to worry over and awfulize about for all of us. But I've been working on something. In the midst of having cancer and going through radiation, I've been working on giving thanks in all circumstances. Not some pollyannish, saccharine sweet kind of approach, but going to the belly of the beast, facing it, being real about it, and learning to give thanks to God. Not for the cancer! But giving thanks for the nurses who are extraordinary caregivers and the doctors with their insights and skills. Giving thanks for good conversations and new friendships with other patients I've met, and for me learning to practice patience, of giving up control. And then I'm learning to let that gratitude ripple outward.

We are a congregation who reads and thinks and is activist. We're involved in the problems in our world and in our town. So when we're together it is easy to talk about what's wrong, the injustices, and the grief and pain. Here's my challenge – to myself and to you. What if we went from practicing complaint to practicing thanks? What if we went from having an attitude to being a people of gratitude? Let's continue to be involved. Let's stand up for justice and not shrink from the tasks before us. But instead of worrying and fretting, what if we learned to give thanks, be generous, bring our treasures to God, and see where our hearts end up?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.