A Way of Faith 3- More Gratitude

Unity Church July 27, 2025

Psalm 40

“Yet will I rejoice in the Lord.” Fair warning, if you are going through a rough period in your life, dealing with grief, loss, or simply feel like you’ve been standing under a storm cloud for what seems an eternity, this sermon might not be for you, or it might be exactly what you need to hear.

It occurred to me this week that probably more important than the how’s and why’s of Bible Study, Prayer and Meditation, we’re not done looking at the idea of “approach,” our approach, us opening the door of our heart, our soul to whatever the Holy Spirit has set on our door step.

Last week I probably spent too much time explaining the difference between Western and Eastern woodworking, but I pointed out that the masters who embrace the ways of Eastern woodworking talk about and consider one’s approach to a project or a piece of wood. That is, what do I bring to the party, my skill, my eye, my imagination, my respect.

At first blush, when applying this to our spiritual walk, it feeds into an idea of unworthiness. That is, I must be the reason for my distant or strained relationship with God. How many times have we heard the old saw: “If God seems far off, guess who moved?”

There’s truth in that, but there’s also a “but”. There’s an inference that if I’m a good little boy who sits quietly beside the throne all day, everything is going to be just peachy. I wish it was that black and white, but most of us are called to live our lives. Whether we intend it or not, living those lives can get quite messy. In that mess we get bogged down in problems, challenges, people who rub us the wrong way, loved ones who die or get sick, budgets that don’t budge but are still short on one side.

We’re, by design, human. We respond negatively, we react without thinking, we worry, we get angry. We do and say things that we wish we could unsay or undo almost as soon as they leave our mouths. Like I said, we’re human. All this leaves us worn down if not worn out, weighed down, withdrawn and reactive. And along comes someone telling us that if we’d faithfully read the Bible and pray daily, everything would be hunky dory.

1

Last week in the sermon I raised some eyebrows when I suggested that if your prayer life is or has become a drudgery, something you do with about as much enthusiasm as you used to say, “Now I lay me down to sleep…” There’s a problem. If you’re doing it out of obligation, stop doing it.

I also said if your time alone with scripture is or has become a drudgery, something that you do with about as much enthusiasm as your 8th grade Algebra homework. There’s a problem. If your doing it out of obligation, stop doing it.

I wrestled with whether or not to leave that in there, after all what pastor in their right mind would tell a church to stop praying or stop reading scripture? It comes as little surprise to you that I’m probably not in my right mind, but that’s a discussion for another time.

If your daily habit of eating became a drudgery, something that you had to force yourself to do, almost had to fight with yourself over, you, or your spouse would think that something was wrong. If you ask Sabrina, when a cow doesn’t eat, something is wrong. Not that we’re cows but the same idea applies. She’d call the vet and your spouse would make a Dr’s appt. Why, because something is wrong.

If you as a parent had a child who became withdrawn, wouldn’t talk, seemed lethargic or at least apathetic about everything that used to excite them, you’d probably ask them what was the matter? Not that something’s wrong, but knowing that everything isn’t right either.

The same is true of praying and Bible study: the drudgery aspect is a symptom, an indicator, there again, not that something is wrong but that everything isn’t right either.

Some of us grew up with the practice of prayer and Bible study and it became habitual, rather like brushing your teeth before going to bed. You don’t think about it, you just do it. Although habits at least get it done, the results can become stale as we simply go through the motions. There are denominations who celebrate communion each Sunday. I understand the thinking behind this but I often wonder if it doesn’t lose its meaning. I have Catholic friends who pray the rosary each day religiously, but it can become perfunctory, or simply going through the motions.

2

But back to telling you that if your daily spiritual practices have become drudgery, stop doing them. Bernie Hoyt was our family doctor for years. He gave you the impression of what a Country Doctor would have been if he’d practiced 50 or a 100 years ago. He was an Osteopath who practiced medicine with a fair amount of common sense, some might say horse sense. He was slow to reach for his prescription pad. I can recall him saying more than once to “Let nature take its course, if we need drugs we’ll get them.”

He delivered both my daughters. My younger daughter wouldn’t nurse, either her mother or a bottle. I should qualify that, she didn’t nurse with the enthusiasm of her sister or other babies. I think it was at the first or second weekly follow-up my wife shared her concern with Dr Hoyt about the child not eating enough. He patted her on the arm and said, “let’s keep an eye on it, but she’ll figure it out, a baby won’t starve itself.”

To the pair of us as new parents, that advice, although given re assuredly, didn’t assure us too much. We were both certain that she was broken and needed medical intervention immediately. His wisdom and experience proved to be right. She did figure it out, and this now 45 year old mother has two of her own that she nursed herself.

The point of telling this story is not that we are infants, we are children, possibly sheep. But I have spoken numerous times about Blaise Pascal’s assertion that we are created with a God shaped void. I am convinced that as a baby will nurse when it’s hungry, a sheep will graze for the same reason and we who have responded to the call, the nudge of the Holy Spirit and accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, will recognize a desire to go deeper and be part of a closer relationship with our heavenly Dad.

I mentioned earlier that old statement, “If God seems far off, who moved?” We all know the answer to that question. I did, you did, we did. There are a million reasons, a million excuses why, but the recognition that he seems far off is in itself a step in the right direction. It is said that half of solving a problem is recognizing that you have a problem.

I’ve said before that the long term solution to this reality is not a list of “Should, Ought, Must,” rules and directions. Besides impressing me as being Pharisaic, long term it produces a lot of folks going through the motions. Using the old joke of how many Psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb, I think it has to be internal, a desire of the heart, not a discipline of the mind. 3

By the way the answer is: One, but it has to really want change.

Which leads me back to the sermon title, More Gratitude. I am convinced that a major part of faith is recollection or remembering. A major part of the scriptures is the account of how God has dealt with, provided for, chased after, loved and protected his own, starting with Israel and ending with the Apostles. Another aspect of our faith is a recollection of what God has done in our own lives through the Holy Spirit. If we are honest with ourselves, the result of these two recollections leads us to a spirit, a sense of gratitude. Practicing this gratitude reaffirms, strengthens our faith, our peace, our unflappability.

The book we are working through in Sunday School, Life is Hard, God is Good, Let’s Dance, talks about a “Second Naiveté.” In short it refers to believers that most of us think are naive, crazy or at least don’t understand the weight of the situation. You know, the ones who assure you that regardless of how bad things seem right now, by the grace of God everything will work out, everything will be fine. At first blush they come across being so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good.

But Brant Hansen, the author, points out that this is indeed a second naïveté not a lack of experience or a pie in the sky by and by approach to life. This comes out of having gone through the fire, the daily trials and tribulations of life and having experienced the presence of God in and through those challenges. Having come through these realities leaves an assurance, an understanding, of what and how God works in our lives when we allow him to.

Which brings gratitude. The recounting, the praise for the things God has done. It’s interesting, the phrase, Rejoice in the Lord appears 38 times in scripture, Rejoice, 154; Praise, 363, 182 times in the Psalms; Bless the Lord, 144. This act of recounting the acts of God, this practice of gratitude, starts out as an intellectual exercise. The choice we make to do it, or start doing it, is an intellectual act it can’t help but be.

But instead of a burden, a rule, I would suggest and pray that it is simply the act of you giving yourself permission to practice this gratitude, to recall and recount the grace and mercy of our Father. As the Psalmist says “Teach me thy ways O God,” We need to pray, “remind me of your unfailing love, give me a spirit of gratitude to praise your name.”

4

The first time I attended Tom and Lila’s Community Bible Study, Tom said something about the Bible that struck me, “We know how the story ends.” Which reminded me of a book by Rob Bell, Love Wins.

All of us, regardless of age, or life experience can look back over the course of our lives and see a couple of things. 1st) All the times when life has seemed it’s most heartbreaking, impossible, overwhelming, and God has brought us through. 2) if you connect all the dots of your life experience together, chances are good that you can see not only directionality, but purpose which I will argue is there again God ordained, God purposed. 3) even if your life has been filled with tragedy, bad choices and what others call sin, I go back to Romans 8:28, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” The fact that you are sitting here today is proof that you have responded to his call. All of these tragedies, bad choices and sin, have worked together to bring you to where you are today: ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

I’m going to close with one of my favorite pieces of scripture from the Old Testament which I hope illustrates our need for gratitude. Habbukuk 3:17-19:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.

Our God is an Awesome God!

Amen

Psalm 40 Of David.

1 I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.

4 Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud,  
    to those who go astray after false gods.

5 You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

7 Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

8  I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

9 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.

10 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

11 Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.

12 For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head,  
    and my heart fails me.

13 Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me.

14 Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life;  
let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt.

15 Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, “Aha, Aha!”

16 But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the Lord!”

17 As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me.  
You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.