



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: July 26, 2009

More Than Manners, Lynne Kramer

Luke 17: 11-19

Before I retired, most of my ministry was spent with children. I've known three-year-olds who could recite the Pledge of Allegiance, seven-year-olds who could correctly assign every player to every team in the N.B.A., and ten-year-olds who could remember every present they received on their previous nine birthdays. But I have met very few children, including my own child, who could remember to say "thank you."

Ask them the name of the neighbor's cat that died five years ago – no problem. But remember the "magic words"? Never! Once, maybe twice a day, parents all over America grit their teeth and prompt their children with, "What do you say?"

I used to wonder if scientists would ever discover a gene for an ungrateful heart, or a chromosome that would give new meaning to the phrase, "a born ingrate"... maybe not a dominant gene; just a recessive one. Well, it turns out, scientists have done just that. In fact, there is an entire field of study entitled "the science of gratitude."

Research has shown that about 50 per cent of our feelings of wellbeing – or lack thereof - are inherited. That is our "set-point" of happiness. The other 50 per cent of our feelings of wellbeing are determined by intentional activity, which requires effort. Can we change our inherent disposition by being thankful and counting our blessings? The answer appears to be yes.

Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, examined the relationship between gratitude and physical and mental health. In one study, half the participants were asked to record their blessings in a journal, and the other half of the participants were asked to keep track of their daily hassles. The findings showed that the "blessed" people suffered fewer physical ailments, felt better about their lives and were more optimistic about the future than the "hassled" people. (Thanks! by Robert A. Emmons, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007, pg. 13) Additionally, the people who recorded their blessings reported getting more sleep, spending less time trying to fall asleep, and feeling more refreshed upon awakening, which may be one reason why grateful people generally feel more alive and vital during the day. So it's true: you will fall asleep counting your blessings!

Not surprisingly, people who were consciously aware of their blessings were more pleasant to be around, their marriages were more successful, and they were less lonely. They were less materialistic, less envious, less

depressed and better able to cope with stress. They also felt more loving, joyful, forgiving and enthusiastic. Furthermore, longitudinal studies indicate that thankful people live an average of nine years longer and make an average of twenty-five thousand dollars more than other people.

Self-sufficiency is a badge of honor these days, and we are often tempted to delude ourselves in believing that we are self-made. We go to great extremes to avoid any sense of obligation to another person. In his famous essay entitled "Gifts," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained, and we do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten." (Thanks! pg. 130)

But science is finding that such self-sufficiency may have negative effects on our mental and physical health. Instead of congratulating ourselves on our independence, gratitude requires that we affirm our dependency on others and recognize that we need to receive many things that we cannot provide for ourselves. Through his research, Emmons has come to believe that "Life is about giving, receiving and repaying. It is gratitude that motivates us to receive and it is gratitude that motivates us to repay by returning the goodness that we have been given. In short, it is gratitude that enables us to be fully human." (Thanks! pg. 55)

In biblical times, to have leprosy was to be less than human. In the book of Leviticus, the rules concerning lepers (which includes a variety of disfiguring skin diseases) are harsh and unequivocal. According to Hebrew law, "the leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry 'unclean, unclean' ... and he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp." The house of the leper must be destroyed and the pieces carried out of the city to an unclean place. Isolated, lonely, and in permanent quarantine, the lepers in today's scripture keep their distance even from Jesus when they ask for help.

Only a priest could declare a leper healed and fit for society. In following Jesus' instructions to show themselves to the priests, all ten are obedient and all are declared healed. But only one leper shows his gratitude: the Samaritan, the "foreigner" and non-Jew of mixed race. He is the only one who is thankful and stops to reflect, and he – the ultimate outsider -- is the one who becomes a model of faith and discipleship.

In a reversal of rabbinical law that is typical of Jesus, the Samaritan becomes the real insider. His gratitude becomes an expression of faith that cleanses his spirit as well as his body. The other nine and presumably Jewish lepers deprive themselves of the joy of praising and giving thanks.

The story of the grateful leper reminds us that without a sense of gratitude, we are the outcasts who are distanced from God by our ingratitude. We are the ones who deprive ourselves of the joy of praising and giving thanks.

Are the other nine lepers really ungrateful? Probably not. But instead of returning to thank Jesus, after they are cured, they return to their villages and become preoccupied with their restored lives...just as we do when we are released from the hospital, or leave home, or graduate from college, or advance in our careers, all without expressing our thanks and appreciation to those who helped us on our way. Unlike our children, we don't have anyone to chastise us for our lack of manners.

But gratitude is more than manners. In fact, most theologians -- Luther, Wesley, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Tillich, to name a few -- believed that gratitude is the basis of spirituality. Another theologian who passionately shared that view, a theologian who was also a physician, Lutheran minister, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was Albert Schweitzer. Exactly 90 years ago today, in Strasbourg, France, Schweitzer preached what be-

came one of his most famous sermons, entitled “Fulfill Your Destiny.” In it, he elaborated upon the philosophy of life for which he is still remembered and revered.

“Developing a true sense of gratitude,” he said, “involves taking absolutely nothing for granted. Nothing that may happen to you is purely accidental. Everything can be traced back to a will for good directed in your favor.

“Balance the books inside of you,” he said, “and see if you are repaying in full the amount you owe to unknown men and to fate itself. This is what you must do all your life, in things great and small.” (Reverence for Life by Albert Schweitzer, Harper & Row, 1969, p. 321)

Every single religion in the world believes that giving thanks is critically important. Just take a close look at our own church bulletin. The invocation and prayers of thanksgiving, the introit, the offering and doxology, the anthem and hymns, the reflection and even the first three announcements under “church news” – all are expressions of gratitude. That’s what we do here. That’s why we come here, because every gift we acknowledge, even the most ordinary and mundane, reveals another and another and another.

In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years’ War, it was reported that a German pastor named Martin Rinkart buried 5000 people in one year, an average of 14 a day. His parish was ravaged by war, death and economic disaster. In the heart of that darkness, with cries of fear outside his window, he sat down and wrote this prayer as a table grace for his children:

Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices.
Who, from our mothers’ arms,
Hath led us on our way
With countless gifts of love
And still is ours today.

This prayer is now widely considered to be the best general purpose hymn ever written, appropriate for every significant occasion of a person’s life, be it a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral.

Psychologists have identified an emotion called “elevation,” which is an uplifting feeling that people experience when they witness unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness and compassion. It is characterized by a warm feeling in the chest, by tears welling up, by chills and a lump in the throat. Elevation is widely recognized as the physiological experience of gratitude.

But nearly a century ago, on this very same Sunday in July, Albert Schweitzer described to his congregation a different sort of grateful elevation. “When your gratitude ascends to God,” he said, “you yourselves are lifted up above a worldly view of life, and everything below you disappears from sight. You realize how your life rests in him. You see the world as it is in him.”

He concluded his sermon by encouraging his parishioners to “learn to understand the secret of gratitude, for it is more than what we call a virtue. Learn to see it as a mysterious law of existence. (Because) the gratitude ascending from man to God is the supreme transaction between heaven and earth.” Amen.