

Trusting in a Generous God
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Sunday, November 24, 2024
Pastor Vern Christopherson

I've got a question for you: were you born with a thankful heart? As a child, if somebody gave you a piece of candy or a birthday present, did you automatically say, "Thank you." Or did you need a little prompting, such as: "What do you say to Grandpa and Grandma?" I think being thankful is a learned behavior. And any feelings of gratitude develop only as we practice it.

Another question for you: if an unexpected blessing comes along – a lovely weekend, a good report from the doctor, a surprise connection with a long-lost friend – do you routinely say thank you? My hunch is that you often want to, especially if you've gotten in the habit of regularly saying thanks. But let's be honest, in today's fast-paced world, finding a time and a place to say thank you is not as easy as it sounds.

When I was growing up, we had a practice in my family of going around the Thanksgiving dinner table and sharing something for which we were especially grateful. One year, when it my little brother Tim's turn, he stopped shoveling in the turkey and mashed potatoes just long enough to look up, shrug, and say: "I'm thankful for family and friends, I guess." And then he went right back to his dinner. You can probably guess that my family has never let our little brother forget his eloquent Thanksgiving testimony.

Still another question for you: if you were asked to name something for which you are especially thankful – and not just at Thanksgiving but any day – what would it be? And would you stop to name it? If so, when and where? As I see it, it takes some effort to say thank you. Our lives are busy. We sometimes forget. And on the negative side of the ledger, there are lots of grievances that chip away at our gratitude. Thus, an expression of thanks isn't always the first thing on our lips.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about the practice of giving in the life of a Christian. Keep in mind, these are new Christians to whom he's writing. Earlier in the letter, Paul mentions an opportunity to take an offering for believers in Jerusalem who are going through some tough times. I can imagine a few of those new Christians in Corinth grumbling: "You're asking us

to give to believers in Jerusalem? That's a long way away! Can't we help somebody closer to home?"

Again, I'm only imagining the pushback, but it happens from time to time. Paul urges them – and us – to give thanks in all circumstances, whether we have little or much. Give thanks, Paul says. It will help you remember that everything you have is the gift of a generous God.

Friends, how can we better learn this lesson? Over and over in the psalms, God's people are instructed to "give thanks." Taking this a step further, the psalms don't tell us to *be* thankful, so much as to *give* thanks. There's a difference. *Giving* thanks is not a feeling, but an act of worship. And it's something we can offer whether we always feel like it or not.

In 2 Corinthians Paul identifies some basics of Christian giving. He says, *giving* starts with "giving yourself first to the Lord" (8:5). It's an act of commitment. Paul goes on to encourage an *attitude of generosity*: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7). There's no arm twisting as the plate is passed. Finally, Paul shares an incredible promise with them: "God will provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (9:8). What a remarkable claim! I wonder if the Christians in Corinth had trouble believing it. Sometimes I do. How about you?

During the month of November, I usually keep a gratitude journal. I spend a moment at the end of each day jotting down three things from that day for which I'm grateful. Why do I do this? Because I need to practice. Because sometimes I forget to say thank you. Paul says that *God provides us with every blessing in abundance*. We need to be reminded of that because some days it's far too easy to simply criticize and complain.

Paul offers an important alternative: *give thanks in all circumstances*. That doesn't mean we'll always be happy with the things that come our way. But maybe, by stopping to reflect, we can find something for which to give thanks. It's all about the practice, and about what happens to us in the process. We're not born with thankful hearts, after all. We develop them over years and years of giving thanks.

A few years ago, John Kralik wrote a book called *365 Thank Yous*. Kralik was in a tough spot in his life. His small law firm was losing money. He was going through a painful divorce. He lived in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an ancient air conditioner.

One day Kralik got lost while hiking in the mountains. He didn't know how to get home. He was worried and scared. By the time he finally found his way down the mountain, he had a plan. He was going to write a thank-you note each day for a year. "My only problem," he thought, "was figuring out if I had anything for which to be grateful."

As you might imagine, Kralik got off to a slow start. Then one morning he stopped at his regular Starbucks. The barista greeted him by name—"John, your usual venti?"—and he said it with a smile. Kralik later reflected: "What a great gift in a day and age of impersonal relationships, that someone had cared enough to learn my name and what coffee I drank in the morning." Kralik wrote the barista a thank-you note. So it went for an entire year. And each day became a moment of giving thanks.

How important is gratitude in our lives? Maybe more important than ever as we struggle with inflation and paying the bills, with worries over commodity prices, with a church budget that's been running in the red.

In the face of our struggles, Jesus tells us: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." What does Jesus mean by that? It's easy for us to turn it around and to hear: "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." We then can apply it to everything from a fundraising breakfast for the fire department to a letter from Good Shepherd asking for help in finishing up the year on a strong note. The fundraising effort can come across little like arm twisting: "If you really care about this project or institution, you need to do what you can to support it!"

I think Jesus is taking a slightly different approach, however. He's saying: "Give where you want your heart to be, and let your heart catch up." Ask yourself, "If I were the sort of person that I long to be, then how would I spend my money?" Jesus is saying, "Put your treasure there. If you do, your heart will go there too." For instance, if you want to care more about the kind of car you drive, buy an expensive one. If you want to care more about property values, remodel your house or your lake cabin. And if you want to grow in your faith, bring an

offering to God. Not reluctantly, or under compulsion, but cheerfully. For wherever your treasure is, your heart is sure to follow.

Friends, I see this winter and spring as an important time for Good Shepherd. Over the past year, you've been experiencing yet another interim ministry. It might have felt a little like whiplash. *Here we go again.*

Currently, the Transition Team is rewriting our Ministry Site Profile, which will go to the Church Council in December, and then to the congregation at the annual meeting. The Ministry Site Profile is a snapshot of who we are and what kind of pastoral candidate we hope might be interested in coming here. As we write the profile, we try to be hopeful as we tell our story, but yet to be honest too. It's a delicate balance. Pretty much everywhere, it seems, it's not an easy time to be the church.

During such a time as this, I encourage you to put your trust in a generous God who promises *to provide for you every blessing in abundance*. As God makes this promise, I urge you to continue to look for ways to practice generosity in the sharing of your time, talents, and treasures.

Above all else, practice giving thanks again and again. Keep in mind that being thankful is a learned behavior. It can take a lot of prompting for us to learn it, often a lifetime. Always remember that all you are and everything you have is the gift of a generous God. And God very much likes it when we find a way to give thanks in return. Amen.