

“Gratitude and Generosity”

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Scripture

Psalm 100:1 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. 2 Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. 3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. 5 For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Sermon

Gratitude has been on my mind a lot lately. Since our retreat during centering prayer I have been using the words, “thanks” and “I’m grateful,” in order to focus my attention on the good things that our Divine Lover has given me.

And I do believe that being centered on gratitude first also made a big difference in reducing my anxiety as we considered the church budget and stewardship drive.

Was it these prayers that resulted in a nearly 5% increase above the 2.5% increase in giving that was our challenge? Or were these moments of prayer simple attempts to calm my own doubts and fears?

Last year, if you recall, we could not reach our giving goal and had to make subsequent cuts to the proposed budget.

This action occurred after several years of expanded giving. It was clear then to me that we had likely reached our limits. I was convinced we were tapped out and that if nothing significantly changed in the make up of our fellowship then increases to the budget were unlikely for the future.

But I am also convinced if you do not ask it is also unlikely that giving will increase.

And so, even though a 2.5% increase seemed pretty small
I had my doubts that we would make it.

In reality I think that my focus on gratitude reminded me
that regardless of how the budget came out in the end,
I still had much to be grateful for!

It reminded me that stewardship drives and church budgets
do not change the fact that I have three incredible women in my life
giving me lots of unconditional love, support, encouragement, wise counsel
and a good kick in the butt sometimes when I am acting stupidly!

I am also so lucky to be a part of a group, a true community of folks
who give so much of their time and money
to support this little tugboat we call FCMF!

I'm am really proud of you and I am sorry I ever doubted you!

And where'r I go and whenever I get to talk about you all
I swell up with pride and go on and on about your great faith
and your great efforts with never a discouraging or critical word.

No, believe me, that's true!

I know you don't believe me since I kid around a lot
and sometimes I can be quite sarcastic.

But it's true!

And I'm not just flattering you for supporting
some of my most recent "crazy ideas"!
(Well... maybe just a little?)

This year's budget and pledge season was one of the most
thrilling and joy filled processes in my time at FCMF.

But now, after all the confetti has been swept up
and the cake and champagne has been consumed,
it time to get down to work.

Which curiously for me is the harder part.

I love coming up with ideas. That energizes me.

The future always looks bright when I envision it in my dreams.

But getting there takes effort, time,
and usually some adjustment of dream and expectations.

In addition to all that added stress it can begin to stir my anxiety and fear!
Perhaps we have bitten off more than we can chew?

What if we fail?
What if my opponents end up being correct
and their worst fears are realized?
Will I allow the anxiety of others to exacerbate my own?

Dreams are wonderfully exciting cause everything works out in the end.
But to keep dreaming means you're still asleep!
To put your dreams into practice means to take a risk.
And to take risks, we all know, can be scary -
the main reason for why we often shrink back from them!
Taking risks can also be exhilarating and in the end
produce profound growth as well as increased self-confidence!

So if this is the case why are we so reluctant to take risks?

Well, as I said above, fear is the most likely reason.
We are afraid of failure, looking stupid, ridiculed
and sometimes actually physically or emotionally injured.
We may begin to have uncertainty that we can't really trust those
who have also committed themselves to perusing the dream.
We may also begin to doubt that which had once seemed so clear
before the actual journey grew a bit tougher.

Maybe, deep down we don't really think we are actually trustworthy.
But trust must be based upon experience.
In whom, what and where we place our trust
is what in the end makes all the difference.
The only way that I can influence you or anyone else to be trustworthy
is when I find concrete ways to be someone who can be trusted.

Which brings me back to gratitude!
The arrangement of our holiday season,
during the final month of the calendar year,
always provides me with a powerful reminder of the importance
of timing when it comes to the relationship of gratitude and giving.
And this isn't the first time I've said this in a sermon,
but it is crucially important that Thanksgiving
always comes before Christmas!

As much as our society wants to start decking the halls
right after Halloween we need to mentally and spiritually resist it!
If in rather simplistic terms we can say that Thanksgiving
is a reminder to celebrate the bounty God has given us,
and that Christmas is the season where the emphasis is on giving gifts

and sharing this bounty, then the calendar assures us of the correct order of things!

First we give thanks, we center our full attention on being grateful for what we do have.

We do not begin by sitting on Santa's lap asking for what we do not have or asking for more of what we already have.

And since Santa has eclipsed Jesus's birth as the "reason for the season!" it is certainly understandable why so many Christians have confused God and Santa.

Rather, we must begin by being grateful, by giving thanks. Maybe you have noticed the same thing I have, that those who are the most grateful, often turn out to be the ones who are also the most generous.

The arrangement of the seasons can also help us remember that God wants us to be doing both throughout the year. Gratitude flows into a natural desire to give which then flows, back again, into thankfulness.

I like to call the season between Christmas and Thanksgiving, "Thankful Giving". But, of course we all know that we needn't wait until the end of November to practice it! But since they say, "Practice makes Perfect", sometimes we do need a period of time for practice to get us into shape for the year ahead?

A season of Gratitude and Generosity; an extended time of both receiving and sharing a time of focused attention to thankfulness and giving, and the repetition of the experiences of both forgiveness and grace.

I've also noticed that truly grateful people are not only quite generous they also seem genuinely at peace and content. When times are tough they don't seem all that worried, and when times are good they seem even more happy since they now have even more that they can share.

In the end, regardless of the season, an attitude of gratitude is certainly one

of the greatest gifts we can give to others.

And let us not forget, that this is one of our core values as a fellowship:

Faith-filled, Grateful Attitude

In God's economy, we have enough resources: enough finances, enough love and nurture, enough volunteers, enough time. Be grateful while also working to grow resources.

Maybe we should consider a minor change to this beautiful statement by inverting the two sentences and starting with the words, "Be grateful?"

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