

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Texts: Eph. 5:15-20; Psalm 100

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Introduction

I ran across a story about a guy named Randy Hoffman. He's a sculptor of monumental religious themes – "Christ on the Cross", "The Last Supper", "Jesus Praying", "David and Goliath".

I'm told in the summer time you can see his work in front of the Plim Plaza Hotel at Second Street in Ocean City, Maryland. You'll have to go to the beach though, because his medium is sand and ocean water.

Hoffman is also an ordained minister who now earns his living as an artist, and sees his sand sculpture as part of his ministry. To see great works of art, in sand, raises questions. Why bother making something beautiful and substantial out of something as fleeting and ordinary as sand? Time is always your enemy; the ocean will come and do what it always does.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians urges us: *Be careful then how you live- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.* In a more literal rendering he's saying, "redeem the time you have been given, because the character of the days left to themselves is corrosive."

Great art in sand make us think about the sandy lives we live. Will we seek to make something beautiful of the fleeting time we have been given (redeem it), or will we simply surrender ourselves to whatever the tide brings? The Christian life isn't meant to be a passive thing.

But how? How do we change the character of our times when the challenges are great, and our time seems short? Part of Paul's answer seems as unsubstantial as child's sandcastle:

"Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Greet our days, all of them, with thanksgiving. Am I the only one who sees that as a tall order? Let's explore our gratitude a bit this morning.

1. If we're going to have an attitude of gratitude about us today, and tomorrow, we need to recognize the source for thankful living.

If you turn to the book of Psalms, you'll find only one that comes with these specific instructions: "A psalm. For giving thanks." It's Psalm 100. It gives us reasons why people can be thankful to God.

Those reasons can be summed up in three phrases: we are God's people, God loves us, and God will love us forever. Thanksgiving is rooted in what we make of God.

Literally, the word thanksgiving means "to speak well of grace". Think about that for a minute. It is God's grace, his unmerited favor, which allows us to be one of his children. It is grace that allows us to be the objects of his love. And it is grace that promises us a future with God that will know no ending.

That's important because the most common idea behind being thankful is that it is a reasonable response to our ability to bless ourselves. You can't be glad if you're sad. So buy a new high definition television, take a vacation, lose twenty pounds; and then you will be happy and thankful.

The problem is that once we leave the easy "thanksgivings" of childhood we find that there's much in life we can't control, or won't achieve, and much that doesn't feel very blessed. When we find we can't manufacture our happiness, we tend to sink into cynicism, the corrosive tide of hard times. That "there's dark lining hiding inside of every silver cloud" approach to life.

One of my spiritual discouragements is how easily I lapse into a cynical, thankless spirit. But the spiritual answer isn't simply a matter of putting on a happy face. It's a question of "who do you trust, really?"

Thankfulness, gratitude, is fruit in the life of a person who is sinking their roots ever deeper in the reality of a trustworthy God. Cynicism is fruit of the shallow root that goes no deeper than ourselves.

Psalm 100 makes a rival claim against how most folks think the world works: God claims us, God loves us, and God's love lasts forever. Is that where your roots are headed?

2. Suppose we believe that, in theory. We still need to get down to cases, don't we? What, specifically, are we to be thankful for?

Let's count our blessings. We're thankful for children who bring the car home with all its parts, checking accounts that have money in them at the end of the month, and hospital tests that come back negative. We especially grateful for those seasons when it seems everything we touch turns to gold.

Thankfulness comes easily when everybody loves and appreciates our work, when we're growing close to our spouse and when the church is growing and giving is increasing. What's not to like? It's easy to say we are blessed when the good outweighs the bad.

What does God want us to be thankful for? The Apostle Paul spells it out:

Sing and make music in your heart in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"For everything." I wish it didn't say that. I prefer that idea that we are to give thanks to God "in everything" – an idea also expressed in Scripture in another place. But here we are stuck with "for everything".

What are going to do with this? I'm supposed to remain thankful for the child who left the front bumper lying beside the road, the hospital test that comes back positive, the time when there's more month than money, and the moody spouse? How can this be? How can we live with gratitude if it must be gratitude for everything?

I'm not there yet. Some of us in this congregation are in the midst of difficult times that don't seem to be much of a blessing. So instead of trying to come up with a personal story that makes this tension disappear, let's instead go to two central symbols of our faith: the cross and the table.

We say that the greatest hope in the world is a cross – a symbol of rejection, abuse, guilt, and death. And we give "thanks" for that scandalous cross on which Jesus died. We might as well go about with little sterling silver electric chairs around our necks and say here is the sign of hope.

And then there's the Lord's Table. It reminds us of the last supper Jesus had with his disciples, that many Christians call "Eucharist", which means "thanksgiving". At that dinner Jesus said thanks to God for bread and wine, and then passed it to twelve people; one who would betray him, one who deny him, and ten who would abandon him. Who would say "grace" over such a meal?

It appears that Jesus was willing to hold together laughter and tears, friendship and betrayal, success and failure, sin and salvation, life and death – all the things we struggle so much to reconcile – in an effort to draw us close to himself. Perhaps there are no lost and unredeemable moments when we live our lives in relationship to God. “Always give thanks to God the Father for everything...”

If there’s an area of your life today for which gratitude feels indecent or impossible, allow me to make a humble suggestion. Offer a prayer that goes something like this:

We give thanks to you O God, even for this terrible time, but only because we trust that you are in it, working for the good of all and capable of sanctifying to us our deepest distress.

God does not ask for the sacrifice of our honesty; only for the sacrifice of our praise and thanksgiving.

3. The source for thankful living is God. The substance for thankful living can become everything. But what about the satisfaction? There must be some satisfaction that comes from offering our thanks to God.

A passage in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which tells us to bring everything with thanksgiving to God in prayer, leaves us with an amazing promise:

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

We’re talking about something more profound here than the power of positive thinking. We’re talking about something more powerful than living in denial in regard to our circumstances. Somehow in the act of gratitude and thanksgiving God acts in us to do more than we can humanly expect. He brings peace where its absence is to be expected.

It’s hard to redeem the time – make a stunning sandcastle of your life, unless we are sure our time is in his hands. So I have to go there in praise and thanksgiving, again and again, and hand my time to God, and allow him to hand it back. One hymn of thanksgiving, sung on Sunday morning, isn’t sufficient alone to get the job done.

Have you ever thought that your heartfelt thanksgiving to God may be the most transparent testimony of faith you will make in your life? Paul wants his church to be a people marked by thanksgiving because it is a dead giveaway of a life filled with the Spirit of God. I'm convinced that the genuinely thankful life is still a stunner, still an eye-opener to people whose sense of gratitude has never risen above the circumstances of the present moment.

Conclusion

Children build sandcastles on the beach. It hasn't occurred to them that the inevitable high tide is a reason not to make something transformative and beautiful with the time that remains.

It takes a thankful adult to make a sandcastle out of the common stuff of our lives. One who is grateful that our times are in God's hands, and therefore dares to make something risky, beautiful, and Christ-like with the time we have been given.