

Subtract Your Blessings

Thanksgiving Eve

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Slide: The Hiding Place

I want you to imagine this scenario: It is 1942 in Germany, during the winter. There is snow on the ground in a wooded area. You find yourself on the run from a Nazi manhunt. You are running for your life, thinking it would likely occur you would be caught and brought to a concentration camp, or even killed on the spot when caught, when out of the blue, a complete stranger takes you in. This stranger spends the winter providing you with food and shelter – even getting messages to your family that you are safe. This stranger wants nothing from you and has no expectation of repayment, restoring your faith in the humanity you were certain was lost in the midst of widespread horror.

When you think about this stranger, what they risked for you and what you received, how do you feel? Just imagine it. This warmth,

this positive feeling, perhaps relief mingled with joy, mingled with a sense of connection – this is called gratitude.

Slide: Gratitude

Gratitude. Grateful. It's a noun. It's a descriptor. Oh, but it's so much more than those things because it is deeply connected not only to our emotional wellbeing, it's also important for our physical and spiritual wellbeing. It's important for our relationship to God. More and more studies are showing this – gratitude has been shown to improve sleep, help you in times of illness, motivate you to increase your physical mobility or exercise, increase your faith, and boost your happiness, whether or not bad or difficult things are happening in your life.

Slide: Gratitude Changes...

Let's just go back to the World War Two scenario for a moment as an example. A team of researchers led by Dr. Glenn Fox from the University of Southern California

recently reviewed the world's largest repository of videotaped holocaust survivor testimonies. They found over and over again that the survivors related stories of amazing selflessness, compassion, and generosity by others around them, which likely led to them being able to survive such a horrific time in their lives. Despite their constant fear, suffering, and demoralization, they spoke over and over again of the blessings that came from people while they were in danger.

After reviewing these testimonies, these researchers took some of the stories and transformed them into short scenarios like the one I mentioned at the start of my sermon. They then asked a group of participants to imagine themselves as much as possible within the scenario. While each participant reflected upon these acts of generosity, their brains were measured in an MRI machine.

Although the results may not be too surprising, the

immense sense of gratitude each person felt triggered brain activity in the pre-frontal cortex, an area of the brain where empathy and compassion are said to be located. Also connected to this part of the brain are your heart rate, stress triggers, and pain reduction. These data the researchers found give us a clue scientifically to show that gratitude is necessary for health, wellbeing, and kindness towards others. Gratitude is Godly. It is what makes us deeply tuned to the very God who intended to give us breath, life, and all good things for us.

Slide: Do Not Forget

So, what's the problem? Well...we aren't good at practicing gratitude. Our tendency as human beings is to either focus upon the negative, which is the easier thing to do and has the most attention for us, OR we forget to be thankful. What? FORGET? Do we? Just hear this again from Deuteronomy:

"Take care that you do not forget the Lord your

God...who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow from you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the Lord your God..."

Slide: Practice Gratitude

Let's just face it. Gratitude is naturally difficult. We just don't do it unless something big happens. Why? Well, for one, when things are good, we tend to look at our own merits as if we earned those good things ourselves. At times such as those, we can lose our compassion and empathy upon those who are without.

We can also tend towards thinking that it's their fault that they are without. But, if we look to what we have with gratitude, we

recognize that it is not ourselves that really earn it. It is all gift. In fact, much of it is luck of the draw – we were born with these gifts already while others were not. That is why the more we have, the more we buy, consume, or create, the less grateful we become. Therefore, being in a situation when we subtract some of those good and gracious things from our lives, we can not only see how important they were for us and how much we valued them, but we can also see how others without those things merit our compassion and empathy.

Which means that gratitude, as it pertains to the commandment to love your neighbor and yourself, takes daily practice, and remembering that all gifts come from either our very fortunate natural circumstances or from the very God who desires all of creation to live with abundance.

So, here's what I recommend we do together this Thanksgiving. Our

tendency on Thanksgiving is to contemplate our many blessings and to count them. Nothing wrong with that, I know, as the old song says, "When you're worried and cannot sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep...", and in fact, if you listed three blessings every day as a practice, you would find that also to be powerful. But, instead of counting your blessings, I want you to...

Slide: Subtract your...

SUBTRACT THEM

This mindfulness practice is known as Gratitude subtraction and by doing it, you actually become more grateful, while also calling attention to those who may actually be without that blessing, inviting within you acts of kindness and empathy towards them.

Let's practice this. I want you to imagine being without something that is important to you. What would it be like not to have them or it? How would it feel not to have them or it? Do you

currently know anyone who does not have that very important gift in their life any longer? How would you respond?

Now, I would like for you to think of something very ordinary that you rely upon every day and imagine that you don't have that or something that you take advantage of each day that you are suddenly without? What is it? How would that impact your day? Do you know of anyone who does not have that ordinary thing upon which you rely or take advantage of?

Subtract your blessings and what does it look like? How is your gratitude now? How is your empathy now? How is your relationship with God when you do this?

The last two weeks I have been asking my friends on Facebook these very same questions: Take a picture of something important to you that you can't imagine being without and/or take a picture of some ordinary thing that gets you through your day

each day and imagine what it would be like to be without it – what is it?

(Gratitude study by Dr. Glenn Fox found on the Greater Good Website newsletter for November 2017)

I received over 40 pictures! And, as I saw all these pictures, my heart was open and grateful for all that was shared. Now, I'm going to share a few of them with you but not all...

Slideshow – show each for two seconds (count to two)

Last Slide: Forget Not...

Subtract your blessings and forget not what Almighty God has done for your life. You will find even on the toughest days that you have a blessing for which to savor and give thanks. Try it for a week. Try it each day after that and see how Godly gratitude connects you even closer to God and to the neighbor, the neighbor who deserves your compassion and empathy and the God who deserves your all.

To you, our great redeemer, forever be praise. Amen.