

Gratitude Attitude

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Slide: March 2020

Deep into the time of the Lenten season in 2020, I was standing in this spot the Sunday before the whole world went into lockdown. I remember how easy it was to take advantage of this very moment, to stand in this pulpit and look out to actual people in the pews. I didn't know any different then. I had never had to do things differently at that time. This was how we did church. This is how Lutherans preach and gather.

But then, that very Lent, I was sitting in my study at home looking at a phone and preaching my sermon. About fifty family units were looking back but I had no idea looking at my phone and with my talking, whether anyone heard me. I surrounded myself with people of St. John's on the wall behind me. It gave me some solace, thinking that you were there. Later I saw that about 50 family units were online. We gathered in hope, some of us on Facebook Live, others with the TV ministry that week, but I was devastated. I had no idea how missing this pulpit with your faces would affect me so greatly.

I really took advantage of this. Standing today looking at you, I am filled with immense gratitude.

Think of a time when you were without something valuable to you. Perhaps you were healthy one day and then the next, it went all to pieces. Perhaps you had your spouse and then just like that, he was gone to eternity to live with Christ. Or even something less than that, what did it feel like to have to give up that food you never knew you'd have to give up, that traveling you no longer can do, the independence you thought you'd have. What is it like to recognize gratitude now?

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 at the same time.

Slide: Gratitude Changes

In 2017, even before the pandemic, a team of researchers led by Dr. Glenn Fox from the University of Southern California reviewed the world's largest repository of videotaped WWII 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 trauma, 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 of rescue and compassion and transformed them into short scenarios. They then asked a group of random participants to imagine themselves as much as possible within one of the scenarios. 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 holy. It 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. I think now with social cues even more skewed than before 2020, we have a need to re-remind ourselves about it more than ever. 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. And, we often forget the one who grants us all good things. We just don't do it unless something big happens to knock us off our feet. 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. Empathy is learned. It's a practice. And, it is integrally linked with the commandment

to love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself.

We can also tend towards the thinking that it's a person's fault if they are without the blessings we ourselves may have. 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, some 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 can become. And, the less faithful we tend to be when it comes to our neighbor.

2020 has some really good lessons for us. Being forced into 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 as 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 for Thanksgiving this week and as our women today do with their Thankoffering. 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 or Omission Gratitude 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 Jesus Christ when you do this?

On Wednesday this week, our 8th and 9th grade confirmation class and their mentors, along with our Middle school youth CIA group, created a gratitude wall outside here in the Gathering Area. They practiced this gratitude omission exercise and imagined

something they would miss in their lives. They added those blessings to the wall and I invite you to do the same after our worship today. You will find what you need in a basket on one of the tables.

Last Slide: Never Forget...

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.

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