**Embodying Gratitude**

October 25, 2020 Stewardship Sunday

John 21:15-19 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This sermon is adapted from the Stewardship resources for this year.

The story is told about a farmer who, on one warm summer night, was sitting on the front porch with his wife. The couple had been together for over 40 years. On that particular night, the farmer began to think about how much he appreciated his partner. They had shared so much together. She had been caring, supportive, patient, and forgiving. Overcome with emotion, he turned to his wife and said , “Dear, you have been such a wonderful partner that I am filled with deep gratitude for the blessing you have been to me!”

Love and gratitude are wonderful emotions, but particularly so when they are spoken—when we express them aloud. The phrases, “Thank you,” “I really appreciate it,” “I really appreciate you,” and “I love you,” are very powerful! These words have the potential to grow our love and strengthen our relationships. To not express those feelings aloud is, therefore, an opportunity lost. And yet, the truth is that many of us do not express our love and gratitude very much at all. Even as a church community we may not always say it enough. It is not that we don’t love one another, it is not that we don’t appreciate each other and what we do for God’s mission here at Eastside, it is just that we

don’t say it enough. I am grateful for the Gratitude Team, who I believe has helped us be much better at this.

I invite us to take a moment now to reflect and share with each other in break out rooms, what you are grateful for about Eastside, and about the people you are in the room with. If you do not know them well, I invite you to say: Thank you for being here, and being a part of this community. I am grateful that you are here.

 Breakout Rooms, 5 min, 4/group

What are you grateful for about Eastside

 What are you grateful for about the people you are with

Or say: Thank you for being here, and being a part of this community. I am grateful that you are here.

 Let me now say to each one of you, thank you so much for your presence, and for the many ways you contribute to the life and mission of this church. Thank you for your support and being with Brian and I this past four months of my recovery and for the support I know you will continue to offer. Your time, your sharing of talents and leadership, and your contributions to both our local ministry and Mission & Service change lives every day and are very much appreciated. We are less without you. I am so very grateful to be here, in ministry, with all of you. Thank you!

Expressing our love and gratitude in words is important and often powerful. Did you know, it also helps us, we who do the thanking! Indeed, there are many recent studies that show that focusing on our abundance and expressing our gratitude regularly make us happier and healthier as individuals and stronger as a church community. The Craft/Study group is presently reading a wonderful book, called Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks. Author Diana Butler Bass, sums this up beautifully:

“In addition to heart health, gratitude has also been linked to emotional well-being, lower levels of anxiety and depression, decreased panic attacks and phobias, reduced risks of alcoholism and substance abuse, and longevity (yes, grateful people live longer). Researchers found that thankful people live happier lives as well.”

So bottom line—don’t be shy! Say thank you! Say it often!

While focusing on our gratitude and expressing it aloud is necessary, we all know,

however, that it doesn’t end there. Love and gratitude must also be lived out—expressed in our actions. We all know of cases where someone says “I love you so much,” but their actions are not consistent with their words. They give a mixed message. And we also know that when messages are mixed, people believe our actions over our words. So it is key to both say it and live it.

So, how do we express our love and gratitude to God?

We can say it aloud and we do, regularly through prayers, storytelling, and singing. Indeed, when you think of it, our worship services are often full of words of thanksgiving. But what about our actions? How do we show God thanks and love? For instance, when we have those incredible moments of thankfulness, when our hearts are overflowing with gratefulness and praise, what can we do to express our love and gratitude to God?

Actually, Jesus had something to say about that. When asked once what God expected of a believer, he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And...” “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22: 37, 39)

Neither of those two commands were new to Jesus’ listeners. What was new was the way Jesus linked the two, in essence, saying to people, “You want to express your love to God? Then love one another, love your neighbour. Want to express sincere gratitude for all that God has done for you? Then reach out and care for all those God loves.”

In today’s lesson from John’s gospel we get a similar message. Jesus is speaking to Peter. It is after the resurrection. Jesus is about to leave this earth and he wants to ensure that the disciples understand their mission. It is so important. Jesus asks Peter not once, not twice, but three times, “Do you love me?” And each time, Peter says aloud, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus wants Peter to show him and says, “Feed my lambs” “Tend my Sheep” “Feed my sheep.” In other words, if Peter wants to express his love for Jesus, he should show him and love those whom Jesus loves.

You may recall that it wasn’t so long before today’s story that Peter was similarly asked about his relationship with Jesus. It was the night when Jesus was arrested. Then, after that, also three times, Peter denied he knew Jesus. In the days after the crucifixion, we can imagine that this would have played heavy on Peter’s heart. But here is Jesus giving Peter a path for healing, reconciliation, and an opportunity to get it right—to proclaim that not only does he know Jesus, but he loves him. Peter goes on to live out this love and share his faith with many, bringing others into the Christ community. His actions will speak loudly and reinforce his words. Eventually, Peter will give up his very life for the sake of Jesus. Now that is speaking loudly through your actions!

God came to the earth as a human being, taking on our limitations, our pain, our suffering, our doubts, and our fears. Coming to the world to tell us, but most importantly, to show us, an incredible, life-transforming and never-ending love. God, in Jesus, came to show us that which God had been repeating for centuries through the Hebrew leaders and prophets—we are loved and God will be with us no matter what. Here for us, here with us, changing our very lives forever with love.

Today, God still needs people to show others God’s love and care. Indeed, as Christ’s followers in our time and place, we are called, in grateful response to God’s love and abundance, to be nothing less than the hands and feet of God—making a difference in the lives of others, particularly those in need, for Jesus’ sake. God promises to be with us in this endeavour. Through the Holy Spirit, God promises to help us show this love, God’s love.

There is a wonderful story told of a little girl walking home from church one Sunday with her mom. At one point the little girl turns to her mother and says, “Mommy, the minister’s sermon this morning confused me.” The mother said, “Oh? Why is that?” The little girl replied, “Well, she said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” The mother replied, “Yes, honey, that is true.” “And the minister said that God lives in us. Is that true, Mommy?” The mother replied, “Yes, that is also true.” “Well,” said the little girl, “if God is bigger than us, and lives in us, wouldn’t God show through?”

Indeed, God does show through, in the love and action we exemplify in response to our gratefulness. I think of all the calls and support folk make to one another, the response to those in need during this pandemic, whether through supporting those with food insecurity or reaching out to neighbours and friends, and the time and talent offered to step into needs when myself, and then Harvey too, were off on medical leave!

Today, on this Gratitude Sunday we take time to reflect on God’s love, God’s grace, and God’s abundant blessings in our individual lives, and in the life of this faith community. Today, in a spirit of gratitude, we will pause to give God thanks for all that we have, and all that we are. But let us also take this day and the days ahead to show God our gratitude by letting God’s love shine through us to bless others. May God bless us through our words and may God’s people be blessed through our actions. Amen.