

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

March 24, 2019, The 3rd Sunday of Lent

Psalm 104:1-4, 24-25, 27-28, 33-34, Luke 17:11-19

SPACE FOR GOD: GRATITUDE TAKES NOTHING FOR GRANTED

A Sermon Series Based on Donald Postema's *Space for God*

I know some of you are fans of the show the Big Bang Theory. For those of you who don't know the show, the easiest summary is that it is a comedy about a group of very brainy scientists who don't have a lot of practical life skills, and the people who surround them, who do.

Sheldon is a brilliant man who controls every aspect of his life with precision. He often makes contracts for how people are allowed to interact with his life.

The other night I was flipping through channels and landed on the episode of two of the character's wedding. Sheldon is quite averse to getting presents because it leaves him obligated to the giver. He and the other groomsmen receive a gift from the groom, and Sheldon panics. He knows it is worth \$50, but his wedding present for the couple was only \$38.00. He immediately pulls out his wallet and give the groom \$12.00 so they will be even. But then he remembers he bought them a card, so he takes \$2.00 back and declares them even. Life can go back to normal; he doesn't owe anyone anything.

While Sheldon's fear of owing someone something is a humorous plot twist every few episodes, it's also a pretty sad way to live. Today we are invited to look at giving and receiving in a different way.

This week we are continuing with Donald Postema's *Space for God* as a guide to our Lenten journey.

Two weeks ago, we were invited to choose to make space for God in our daily lives. Last week we were invited to hold onto the promise "I belong to God," and to repeat it as a daily prayer.

This week we are invited to look at being grateful people who say thank you to other people and especially to our God.

Unlike the Sheldon's of the world, we are called to join what Postema calls the spiral of thanksgiving.

Postema writes: "I remember bringing a gift to a birthday party when I was a child. The birthday child met me at the door, grabbed the gift without a thank-you, ran into the room, and threw it among all the other gifts. Why do I still remember that incident? Because the giving of that gift is not complete after all these years! I never received the thank-you needed to close the circle and establish a mutual exchange." (p. 72)

Then he goes on and say actually true gift-giving isn't really like a closed circle where there is a gift and then a thank-you and you are done. Instead he says it's more a spiral

The giver gives a gift, the person receiving it says thank you and now the giver becomes the receiver. Then the joy of giving and receiving moves back and forth between two people.

He gives us a picture of this: "A mother bends down to her child in his crib and hands him a rattle. The baby recognized the gift and returns the mother's smile. The mother, overjoyed with the

childish gesture of gratitude, lifts the child up with a kiss. There is our spiral of joy. Is not a kiss a greater gift than a toy? Is not the joy it expresses greater than the joy that set our spiral in motion? (p. 72)

Postema invites us into this spiral of giving and receiving, reminding us of all the gifts that fill our lives from God.

He tells this story: "As I was driving around Chicago with my parents, we passed the hospital where I was born. I said to my mother: "Tell me once again, how was that when I was born—how did you almost die?"

She replied: "Oh, it wasn't I who almost died. It was you."

Well! Somehow, I had twisted the story around all those years.

I've thought about that conversation a lot during the past years. It's helped me realize that my life is a gift. Of course, I had thought that before—that life is a gift. But it comes home to me with particular poignancy when I say to myself: "On July 3, 1934, I almost died!"

I now accept each day of my life as a gift—a gift for which I am deeply grateful. Life was something that I took for granted so often. But now each day I awake I can say with Hezekiah (in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, who said): "The living, the living, give you thanks O God, as I do today." (Isaiah 38:19, New American Bible).

Postema reminds us that as people of faith we have a Bible filled up with thanksgiving to God. Listen to just a few of these verses:

Psalm 100:3-4 "Know that the Lord is God; We belong to the Lord our Maker, To God who tends us like sheep. Come to God's gates with thanks; Come to God's courts with praise; Praise and bless the Lord's name." (Chamberlain's translation)

Psalm 75:1 "We give thanks to you, O God... We tell your wonderful deeds."

Psalm 95:2 "Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and sing God Psalms of Triumph. For the Lord is a great God..."

Colossians 2:7 "Let your hearts overflow with thankfulness..."

I Thessalonians 5:17-18, "Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks."

Colossians 3: 15-17 "Be filled with gratitude...Sing thankfully in your hearts to God, with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Whatever you are doing, whether you speak or act, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (p. 56)

Then Postema says to us: "Gratitude takes nothing for granted. (quoting Merton) It acknowledges each favor, each gift—both big and small. It also *recognizes the giver...* (p. 54)

This week Postema is inviting us to open our eyes to really see the ways that God gives us gifts. He invites us to recognize the Giver. All around us God cares for us in creation, in the people in our lives, in the gifts of faith.

I've thought about this truth this week as I helped the Frels family prepare to honor and celebrate June's life on Friday at her funeral. It reminded of the times of I have met with many of you

to prepare for the funeral of a husband, a wife, a child, a grandparent. I'm also reminded of the many conversations we've had in hospitals and homes.

As I've sat with families through the years, here and in other church, I've heard stories of births, celebrations, family traditions, favorite stories that still make everyone laugh, stories of life here at First Presbyterian, memories of Sunday School teachers and pastors, family trips, favorite hobbies and crafts, sports that were shared together, favorite pets, weddings shared, and other funerals remembered.

Those times of illness or planning a funeral are such a strong reminder to say thank you daily to the people who touch our lives. They are also a reminder to really see the ways that God is active and present in our lives day by day, so we can say thank you daily to our God.

In planning funerals, or stories told in hospital rooms, very specific stories are shared, the names of each pet, the favorite flavors of ice cream made with the ice cream churn, what mom's knitting or crocheting created for each person, what kind of flowers or trees dad planted in the garden, pranks played by brothers and sisters, what happened in the station wagon on the family trip, the beauty of creation seen together, all the meals around the dining room table, sitting side by side in the family's pew in church, how spouses and partners found each other, truths learned from a parent, favorite songs, life in the old neighborhood, the stories that go with each picture in the family photo album.

There are so many reasons for specific thank you's to our God. Just like the prayer the children helped me write during the Children's Sermon.

Postema says gratitude takes nothing for granted. "A thankful life is a response to seeing life as a gift from God and realizing that our lives belong to God. God is the Giver, we are thanks-givers." Then Postema pushes us with these words: "But to recognize the gifts and the Giver we need to be alert and awake; to have our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to what is going on around us. We need to savor each moment as though it were a bowl of homemade soup prepared by someone who loves us very much." (p. 56)

It changes our lives if we start to pay attention to how God is caring for us each day. Instead of just being thankful for a person at the end of their life, or when they are critically ill, it makes a difference to say thank you to them each day for the ways they affect our lives.

Instead of just saying thank you to God on Sunday morning, it makes a difference to say thank you to God every day. The more we start paying attention to God, who is all around us daily, the more times we will find to say thank you.

Postema says: "God is the Giver. We are thanks-givers. As thanks-giving people, we admit that we did not create ourselves. We exist and continue to exist because of God's creative and covenantal love. We belong to God. When we confess: 'I belong, to God,' we also confess: 'I am not my own.' ... We depend on God, the Giver of all good things. And when we receive life and all it contains from God, we can respond with gestures of gratitude." (p. 72, 73)

The spiral of giving isn't just between other people and us. It is between God and us. God gives us all the gifts of our lives, we respond with joyful thanksgiving, now God is the receiver and we are the giver, and the spiral continues. Because our God is a giving God, the opportunities for us to be thanks-givers are all around us.

This week our homework on this Lenten journey is to practice saying thank you to God. For the next seven days, beginning today you are invited to say specific thank you's to God. Before going to bed tonight pick three specific things (or more if you want to) from this day that you are thankful for, then write them down and pray a pray saying thank you to God.

You can write them in your journal or diary if you keep one of those. Or use a piece of paper that you can keep writing on all week. You can use the memo app on your phone to start your list, or open a file on your computer. Whatever simple or complex device you are going to use tonight I invite you to decide right now how you are going to keep your nightly thank you's.

Choosing this as our next Lenten spiritual practice means walking from worship today with our "eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to what is going on around us."

God is the Giver, let us leave worship today as the thanks-givers for the wonderful homemade soup of our lives. Say we can say with Postema and King Hezekiah: "The living, the living, give you thanks O God, as I do today!" (Isaiah 38:19) Amen.

Postema, Donald, *Space for God, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality, 2nd Edition*, Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 1983, 1997, p. 33-50

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*Gratitude takes nothing for granted,
is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder, and to praise of the goodness of
God.*

--Thomas Merton

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and sing him
psalms of triumph. For the Lord is a great God...

--Psalm 95:2, NEB

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is
thank you,
it will be enough.

--Meister Eckhart

Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks.

--1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, KJV

When I feel the joy of receiving a gift my heart nudges me to join creation's ballet,
the airy dance of giving and getting and giving again.

Not value for value received, but a share in the grace of life.

Isn't this why we give our gifts, ourselves to God, creation's Giver?

Not to pay a debt (who can get even with Him?),

But to join His ballet, the dance of grace."

--Lewis B. Smedes

I love the Lord because He hears me when I cry and pray.

Yes--The Lord bent His ear down to me, and I'll talk about it the rest of my life!

--Psalm 116:2, Seerveld trans.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures for ever.

Give thanks to the God of gods, his love endures for ever

Give thanks to the Lord of lords; his love endures for ever...

Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his love endures for ever.

--Psalm 136:1-3, 26, NEB