

“Building Community: Dwelling in Gratitude”

By Scott Runyon

FBCB

October 15, 2017

Ephesians 5:15-20

Children’s Time

Several months ago, I helped a family with something. Afterward they sent me this card to thank me. It really made me feel good that they took the time to send me a card to say, “Thank You.”

Sometimes when other people have done really nice things for me, I have sent a card or said “Thank you” and sometimes I have forgotten. Do you sometimes forget to say “thank you” too? After someone has given you something has your mom or dad said to you, “What do you say?”

We all know what to say, but sometimes we forget to say it, don’t we? There is a story in the Bible about that same thing.

It is about ten lepers. Do you know what a leper is? No, it isn’t an animal with spots. That’s a leopard. A leper is a person who has a disease called leprosy, a

disease that causes sores all over the body.

In Jesus’ day, there was no cure for leprosy and others could catch it, so people who had leprosy had to stay away from other people.

One day, Jesus was walking through a small village and saw a group of ten lepers. They stood far away from Jesus and called to him, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.”

They knew who Jesus was and that he had the power to heal them. Jesus called back to the lepers and said, “Go, show yourself to the priest.” The priest was a religious leader for the Jews.

As the lepers went on their way to see the priest, they looked at their skin and the sores were gone. Jesus had healed their disease. They were so happy that they ran up and down the streets singing and dancing.

But one of them stopped and went back. He praised God and threw himself at Jesus’ feet and said, “Thank You.” Jesus said to him, “Where are the other nine who were healed?” Only one of the ten remembered to say, “Thank You.”

God does so much for us. Every day God provides everything we need: food, clothes, a place to live, and love. Do we ever forget to say, “Thank You” to God? Let's stop right now and do that.

Sermon

It's more than a month from Thanksgiving Day, but let's get in the spirit this morning. What are you are thankful for in your life or in the world?

Now, after sharing gratitude with one another, what does it feel like? Perhaps a little bit lighter? Maybe your smile is a bit bigger?

Living in gratitude is one of the things the Apostle Paul said marks the faithful Christian community.

The message I am preaching today began to work on me nine years ago on Thanksgiving Day 2008. That day, I embarked on a 40-day journey during which I'd get on a conference call every day with a couple of friends of mine, Mike and Brent. We'd take turns sharing about two things. First, we'd share about what we were thankful for that day. Then, we'd share what we were creating. To this day we have weekly gratitude calls.

Initially, we'd share our thankfulness for the things that were going well — like our loving family, good job, house, reliable car, good friends, etc. Day after day it began to sound pretty similar. This was good, because it gave us an opportunity to express appreciation for the things in our lives that were we saw as good.

A couple of weeks into these calls, I started to notice that I was thankful for the rainy day when I wanted to do something outside, because it allowed me to see something beyond what I had planned. I became thankful when I was sick because I could see how blessed I was in my normal good health.

It occurred to me that what had me most thankful was not IN the things that were happening to me, but rather in the perspective I took — how I looked at the situation and what I made that situation mean in my life.

This daily practice of expressing gratitude had me exercising the muscle required to create a space of gratitude inside of me.

I had found a place in which I could dwell called gratitude, and that gratitude could then dwell in me.

READ EPHESIANS 5:15-20

This is a message for us today. Paul acknowledged that he lived in trying times — so do we. He was encouraging the Ephesians, and us, not to deny the challenges that we face, but to intentionally put in place the discipline of a faithful life — which means to live in community with certain values, principles, and actions.

One of those principles is to live in thankfulness through all times and in all situations. One way to do this is to sing. He didn't say that you needed perfect pitch or even a trained voice, but singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs does something for the soul to realign us toward God.

Many speculate, but we don't know exactly what these categories of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" were or sounded like, but we do know that they were filled with praise to God, wisdom and instruction for life, as well as stories of faith.

As many of you who sing in the choir know, when you are giving yourself fully to singing, the music fills not only the sound waves of the air around you, but it fills your soul, your mind, and your heart.

(If you would like to explore the power of music and singing I encourage you to talk with Jack who can plug you into the chancel choir or the bell choir. It is a great way to serve.)

Paul was saying that when we fill our lives in this way with thankfulness, it will get us through even the most challenging of times.

In a very similar spirit, Paul wrote another letter to the faithful community in Colossi. Hear what it says in the "The Message" version:

Colossians 3:15-17

"Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

In Ephesians as well as Colossians Paul wrote about giving God's message, God's good news, a more prominent place in our lives. I

love The Message translation of Colossians where it says to give God's message the run of the house.

When someone has the run of the house they have freedom to go anywhere and they can really own the space.

When Qwynn was real little, I got those safety door handles you squeeze to open for several doors in the house. I put one of these on a door that went upstairs from the living room. I did this to keep Qwynn safe when she was too little to manage the steps. She had to ask an adult to open the door if she wanted to go up the steps.

As Qwynn got older and could manage the steps, I took off the safety handles. Basically, I gave her free access to the steps and therefore the run of the house, going up and down the stairs whenever she wanted.

In those first few days of freedom, I remember how she'd come up to me with a big smile saying, "I am going upstairs!" and then she'd open the door and up she'd go. It was exciting and adventurous for her. Her world had expanded, she was stretching her new muscles of freedom.

However, every once in a while she'd forget that she could open the door herself, and she'd stop in front of the door and ask if she could go upstairs. Usually a few moments later she'd remember and off she'd go up the steps.

It took a bit of time through trial and error, forgetting and remembering, before Qwynn became confident and competent on the steps. After some time it became routine to go up and down the steps without thinking.

Qwynn adjusted to her new freedom to have the "run of the house." She owned the space and took responsibility for this freedom.

Paul wrote about growing the spirit of gratitude so that it had that kind of freedom in our lives — that it would show up everywhere, all the time with the run of our lives.

We read about Paul being thankful in all kinds of bleak situations and we might know this is possible, but when something bad happens we forget. Then we are reminded. Then forget again, then remember that we can be thankful in all situations. This is the process it might take before allowing gratitude the run of the house.

Let's consider, what is gratitude. It might mean more than what you find in the dictionary, but let's start there.

Wikipedia says gratitude...

"is a feeling or attitude in acknowledgment of a benefit that one has received or will receive."

That sounds good, but perhaps gratitude includes more. Before we can experience gratitude, there needs to be a certain kind of space within us — a place for gratitude to dwell. Without creating this space, appreciation never shows up in our lives.

Perhaps gratitude is the space in which it is natural to appreciate things.

Consider that gratitude is actually the space in which we dwell that allows us to appreciate everything in our lives.

This makes perfect sense. We don't appreciate anything given to us or that we find around us, be it gifts, people, things, nature, or even God, until we have within us the space of gratitude.

Once we have the space, we are able to appreciate all things. It is a

different lens, a different worldview, a different perspective by which we see the world and ourselves.

Imagine two friends walking outside on one of those 92 degree days we had this summer. One is pouting and complaining. "Oh man! I can't stand how hot it is! If only it was 15 degrees colder and less humid. And that blasted sun is burning my neck! That means I'll have to take extra time to put on sunscreen, and wear a hat before I go out. I don't have time for all of that! I won't be able to get that house project done that I am in the middle of either. Could the day get any worse?"

The other person, who has created a dwelling place of gratitude in their life, might say, "Look at how beautiful the sunshine is on those trees and how it shines through those clouds! I can wear shorts and sandals today! Look at the beautiful world that God has created! Seeing all of this, I know how much God loves me."

The kind of day each person had didn't have anything to do with the weather itself, but in how they had chosen to experience it.

Now, consider that it is just like this with everything else in our lives.

Are you cultivating a dwelling place of gratitude in your life?

To intentionally cultivate this space of gratitude, there are a couple of things that will help. It really is very simple, but not easy.

The first thing to do is to simply notice what has our attention. On what is our mind preoccupied? We do this without judging whether it is good or bad, right or wrong.

Perhaps your attention is squarely on yourself, your weaknesses, your failures, your pain, the hurt, the negative, all of the places where something is wrong. You'll find that when your attention is on these things there is simply no room for gratitude. It really doesn't help to beat yourself up over it — but just notice where is your attention.

Once you are aware of where your attention is, then you can choose to continue giving your attention to the same thing, or to something else.

Before you are aware, there seems like no choice to make. Your mind will continue to dwell where it has been dwelling. But when you are aware, then you can choose to place your attention where you want to.

Every moment and every situation presents us with an opportunity to choose, if we just notice. Are you going to allow the world to tell you what is important, what you need to focus on, what you need to value? This will often lead you to critical and harsh self-centered judgement.

Or will you take Paul's advise and choose to be thankful? This is always your choice.

Paul was clear with the church communities in Philippi when he wrote to them.

Phillipians 4:8

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

The beauty here is that you can choose where you place your attention, and that can completely alter your experience of living.

Jill Bolte Taylor, a noted neuroscientist and author, found that the chemicals that are released in our bodies producing the emotion of anger are released and run their course and are completely

gone from the body in 90 seconds.

So, why do we find ourselves with a strong emotion like anger for hours, days, weeks, even years? Taylor says it is because we continually think the same thoughts that induce the physiologic response and reproduce the emotion over and over and over again. But, she says that we don't need to do this. Since we can literally only think one thought at a time, she said it is as simple as choosing to redirect our attention onto something else.

I think one of the best examples of choosing gratitude in the face of any situation is again the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians we see what he went through, and what he chose.

He wrote, I've been *"beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes,"* and he goes on and on.

Then he shares his perspective that allows him to keep going with determination in the middle of all of this.

He wrote, *"Now, I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size: abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become."*

Paul rejoiced in appreciation for what God had given humanity in Jesus Christ. It didn't matter what impossible circumstances he had to face, there was a space of gratitude from which he was always able to praise God.

May we likewise create the space of gratitude in our lives that, like Paul, we, as a faithful community, might learn to be thankful in all situations.