

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost- November 12, 2023

Scripture lesson: Psalm 118:1-4 & I Thessalonians 5:15-19

THE GOOD OF GIVING THANKS

On the Thursday after next, most if not all of us, will observe our nation's annual Thanksgiving holiday. Here is a wee history of it.

In 1793, George Washington started it with his presidential proclamation of "a day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God."

In 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln revived this tradition, which had fallen into neglect, by appointing the last Thursday in November as the national Thanksgiving Day.

Then in 1941, Congress specified the fourth Thursday in November as the day for it, which is, of course, the practice that we still follow.

And every president since Lincoln has issued an official Thanksgiving Day proclamation, urging Americans to set aside time to give thanks.

In keeping with that tradition and in preparation for last year's Thanksgiving Day, President Biden said, "I encourage the people of the United States of America to join together and give thanks for the friends, neighbors, family members, and strangers who have supported each other over the past year in a reflection of good will and unity." I think it's safe to say that he'll make a similar statement for this year's Thanksgiving time.

But why have U.S. presidents long felt it important to issue this call? Have they thought that we might not give thanks on our own if it was left up only to us? If so, I think that their suspicion has been well-founded.

For who among us can honestly say that being grateful is something that always has and always will come "naturally" to us? Did any of us as children when we first were given gifts, automatically say, "Thank you"? Have any of us discovered that our own children, when first given gifts, have automatically said, "Thank you"?

Probably not. Instead, we've all needed to be *taught* thanksgiving. We've all needed to be *instructed* to give thanks before we started doing it, and we need to keep being reminded to give thanks once we have started.

In our society, this basic fact of human life is as potent as ever. We hear so many messages aimed to us as consumers that point us away from thanksgiving for and to other people and towards concentration on ME- on what I deserve, what I've earned, what I want, what is mine and what others might try to take from me. Some of our most popular products are marketed under names like iPad, iPod, iPhone, and iTunes.

For years now, most of our stores haven't been able to wait until Thanksgiving Day is over before opening their doors and websites to the "Black Friday" Christmas shopping frenzy, a craziness that has become a major part of our commercial scene. It's one that we actively promote and that's designed to get us thinking much more about all the things that we don't have instead of giving thanks for the many things that we do have. All of these are big reasons,

I think, for why we need more than ever to hear and to heed those presidential calls to thanksgiving.

Much more to the point for us as Christians, though, are the steady reminders that Scripture gives us to give thanks:

From today's reading in Psalm 118- "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever" (verse 1).

From St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4- Rejoice in the Lord always. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (verses 4 & 5).

And from today's reading in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5- "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (verse 18).

Note that in Paul's letters he calls us to give thanks "always", "in everything", and "in all circumstances". The Bible is clear about this- we are to give thanks even in tough times, even when things aren't going our way, even when we don't feel like it at all. Which certainly cuts hard against the grain of both our natural inclinations and our culture's habits. But there it is.

Why is it there? Why do we need to give thanks even in hard times?

A man named John Kralik learned why. He tells his story in a remarkable recent book entitled, *365 Thank Yous*, which I highly recommend to you. In it, he first tells of how in his early 50s, his life was in a sharp, downward spiral. The law firm that he had founded was having serious trouble paying its bills because too many of its clients didn't pay theirs.

His firm's lease was up and he was looking for a cheaper place. His personal finances had dwindled to the point where he'd been forced to move into a small and stuffy apartment where he slept on the floor under an old and noisy air conditioner. He was going through a difficult, drawn-out divorce from his second wife, and his current lady friend had broken up with him at Christmas time.

So, on New Year's Day, 2008, John Kralik decided to take a hike into the mountains of the Angeles National Forest. Down below he could hear the Tournament of Roses parade rolling on in downtown Pasadena. He hiked higher to find some quiet where he could take stock of his life and make some resolutions for starting new. How could he stop his spiral down?

But as he hiked on, he became distracted and got lost. It grew darker and he began to wonder if he would find his way out by nightfall. He imagined falling into a ravine, and doubted that he would survive the night if that happened.

"Then," he writes, "I heard a voice. 'Until you learn to be grateful for the things you have,' it said, 'you will never receive the things you want.'

He continues, "I do not know who spoke to me. I could not explain this voice, or the words it said, which seemed to have no logical relation to the other thoughts in my head . . . The voice was loud enough that I thought it might be important, and that it might have an important message. I should not throw it away."

And he didn't. As he found his way safely down the mountain, he formed one firm resolution in his mind- namely, that he would write a thank-you note *every day for an entire year*.

But immediately, he saw a big problem with that. He says, "Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so."

Nevertheless, he began to write.

He wrote his first thank you notes to everyone who had given him a Christmas gift that year. He wrote to his son, thanking him for repaying a long-forgotten loan. He wrote to friends and associates who had recently taken him out to lunch.

He averaged more than a note a day through January, but then started to sputter. He began letting his thank yous ebb and flow with his emotions. His troubles and disappointments had not magically disappeared, and too often he allowed them to drag him into a mire of self-pity. Feeling so much “Woe is me,” he had a hard time thinking of anything to be grateful for.

One morning he was stuck in that frame of mind when he made his usual before work stop at his local Starbucks. The fellow behind the counter, who had served him many times before, greeted him with characteristic good cheer: “Good morning, John, the usual venti?”

Suddenly, Kralik knew he had something to be grateful for. Embarrassed that he didn’t know this particular worker’s name, he lingered at the counter long enough to hear another customer say it. That night, he sat down and wrote this note to Scott:

“Thank you for taking the time each morning to greet me in a friendly way. It’s also wonderful to me that you took the time and trouble to remember my name. In this day and age, few people make that effort, and fewer still do it in a way that feels sincere. You do both. It really makes a difference to me every day.”

He delivered the note to Scott the following morning and was surprised to see Scott’s “cheery eyes (fall) a shade.” Scott set aside the note without any comment, but the next day he explained his reaction.

Kralik says, “(Scott told me that) he had recently been put in a management position . . . and his day was largely spent on customer complaints. Something about paying three dollars for a cup of coffee makes people feel they can spend endless amounts of other people’s time making sure that their ‘experience’ is absolutely perfect, and that they should voice their opinion about every aspect of (it). So, when I gave him the note, he was wearily thinking it was yet another customer complaint, and from someone who had seemed like a nice customer, no less. Scott had been taken aback to discover that my note had only a simple statement of gratitude.”

Apparently, it was the first of its kind that he had ever received.

This experience with Scott inspired Kralick to launch a series of what he called “extreme thank yous” - extreme at least by his and most of our usual standards. Aware that he often absent-mindedly lost things, he wrote thank you notes to a restaurant manager, a hotel security officer, a theatre attendant, and a neighbor, all of whom had helped him to recover lost items.

He wrote to a courtroom clerk whose “professional manner and even-handed courtesy” he had long admired. He wrote to his daughter’s elementary school teacher, and to Amy who cuts his hair, and to Jessica who helps him at the Drop a Load Laundromat.

He even wrote to Grace, the woman who’d broken up with him at Christmas time, who then had gotten back together with him, but who finally had broken it off for good when Kralick told her that he would likely never be interested in getting married again.

To Grace, he wrote:

“For discovering with me a way to go out on Saturday night and enjoy the night through the light in a loved one’s eyes; for the moments we spent together in the mornings; for your laughter during our lunches at Subway; for making me feel younger and better looking whenever I was with you . . . for giving me your true love; for having the courage to give up

something merely good because it was not what you truly deserve. For all these things I am grateful. In thanks, I will try to be your friend.”

In learning to give thanks even in the midst of his heavy troubles, John Kralik grew a more open and tender heart. It strengthened him to see the many things that he still had reason to be thankful for and to build relationships of mutual support and appreciation that brought even more goodness into his life.

The unexpected notes that he sent to so many people helped him to reconnect with old friends and to deepen his bonds with his current ones. Through a long-time and now refreshed friendship, he gained a new habit of running in charity events, which motivated him to become more physically fit than he had been in years.

Writing his thank yous also allowed him to see the good things that his ex-wife continued to do for their young daughter. That gave him the serenity that he needed to finally move on to a peaceful end to their marriage. It moved him further to reach out in gratitude for the connections he still had with his older children from his first marriage, in spite of what he calls his “lifetime of mistakes” towards them.

The benefits of his thanksgiving kept rolling in. His commitment to it unexpectedly helped to get many of his clients to start paying their bills. It restored his love for the practice of law. It brought home to him again how much the colleagues in his law firm meant to him. And instead of being bitter and resentful over the intimacy that he had lost with Grace, he now felt free to appreciate his ongoing friendship with her.

He writes, “(B)y being thankful for what I had, I realized that I had everything I needed . . . When bad things happened (now), they might slow me down but they no longer unraveled me . . . (I saw that) my life was filled with people who were helping me in large and small ways all day long.”

Being grateful led him to God as well. He had long considered himself to be “something of an atheist”, but as the year went on, he started going to church. He says, “The music was plentiful, (and was) delivered with . . . urgent and genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message (of the service) was that grace is still available to everyone, even to me.”

His new habit of thanksgiving ultimately awakened him to the blessings of God’s grace all around him. As his book comes to a close, he writes “I could see this grace and these blessings everywhere . . . where I had not seen them before.”

Count our many blessings. Name them one by one. Count our many blessings. See what God has done. This is a very good thing to do, even and especially in our hard times. Amen.