

Practicing Radical Gratitude
(third in a three part Stewardship Series on *Gratitude Attitude*)

Thanksgiving/Stewardship Sunday ~ November 22, 2009

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Matthew 6:24-34 (The Message)

²⁴"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to God than birds.

"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think God will attend to you, take pride in you, do the very best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way God works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how God works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

³⁴"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

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Living with a *Gratitude Attitude* has been our focus these past few weeks. The apple has been our symbol, representing both the generosity of God's blessings, as John Chapman's story has revealed, as well as the temptation that we as humans face in a society that worships consumerism. We've been filled with awe and humility remembering the miracle of our own creation and lives. We know that we are FROM God. And being FROM God also has led us to acknowledge that we are in God, with God and especially FOR God. Thus we are people with purpose and Jesus is our model for living daily FOR God.

Now all of these insights are not so difficult to come by, but choosing to change our lives so that we are rooted in and founded on such insights is another matter. A *Gratitude Attitude* must be developed. One must be intentional in living gratitude daily.

Long ago, Aristotle wrote that one learned what justice was by practicing justice; one learned what beauty was by exposing oneself to beauty; and one learned what goodness was by doing good. So, too, we could say that we learn what gratitude is by acting gratefully. (Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, p. 143) This takes practice and I might add, spiritual discipline.

Today I want to think about some of the practices that might help us liberate gratitude in our lives. What might help us nurture a *Gratitude Attitude*?

Let's begin with prayer. There is no better time than the beginning of each day to become aware of the awesome mystery of our beginnings in God, to recognize that we can never take our own lives, the lives of others, or the life of the planet and the galaxies we know for granted. In your bulletin you will find a small booklet of prayers. I hope that some of these prayers will truly speak to you and that you will pray them often.

In your prayer booklet you will find the morning prayer that is printed on page 1. I'd like us to read this together and as we do so, imagine where you might pray this prayer each morning. Would it be before you get out of bed? Or do you have a prayer space, a prayer corner where you go to pray? Let's pray the prayer together.

*Let me awaken into You, O God. Thank You for this day, this resurrection from sleep.
Let me throw off the covers of sleep trusting that You will wrap me round with goodness.
Let me place my feet down on You who are Ground. Grace. Stability of Earth.
Bear me forth into this day with a spirit of gratitude and awe for the gift of life. Amen.*

(A paraphrase of a prayer by Mary Jo Leddy,
Radical Gratitude, p. 145)

You'll notice that there are a number of morning prayers in your booklet. Choose one that speaks to you and use it every morning for a while. And then maybe change to a different prayer. Getting in the habit of beginning your day with prayer is the point of this spiritual exercise. Remember, *Gratitude Attitude* doesn't just happen. It takes intention and discipline.

If we begin each day in gratitude, so too we are invited to end each day in trust. It is in the evening that we have the opportunity of reviewing each day in gratitude, of looking back on the day and seeing that it was very good. Difficulties, heartaches, and sufferings will spring to mind and will make it more difficult to be grateful. And so prayer in the evening provides us with the opportunity of letting go, of practicing what it means to entrust our lives ourselves and our loved ones unto God's care. (Leddy, p. 146) Look on page 5 for the beginning of the NighttimePrayer section. Let's join together in praying the first evening prayer.

*Let me go with You into Your Good Night, dear God.
Loosen my grip on the length of this day.
Let them all go to You all the worries of today.
Let them all go to You all the mistakes that I made.
Let them all go to You all the sufferings of the world.
Lift off the clothes of these my cares. Unbutton my worries one by one.
Cover me with Your Love.
Into Your hands I commend my spirit and my dear ones, near ones and far ones.
Dear God, let me go with You into Your Good Night. Amen.*

(A paraphrase of a prayer by Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude*, pp. 147 – 148)

How do we sustain a *Gratitude Attitude* between our morning prayer and our bedtime prayer? Evelyn Vaughn, in her book *Radical Gratitude* suggests that we build up Ebenezers! (Vaughn, p.175 and segments from other chapters on this topic are also quoted in this sermon) Do you remember the verse from “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” which was composed back in 1758 by Robert Robinson, a Methodist minister and hymn writer. The second verse goes like this:

Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.

The term Ebenezer does not refer to Ebenezer Scrooge, although holding up the old miser and giving him a good shaking does come to mind! What is an Ebenezer, anyway? Ebenezer actually refers to a story in the Hebrew scriptures about the stone that Samuel set up between Mizpah and Jeshanah after the enemy was subdued. Thereby the site became identified with the stone and with the place where God's miraculous help aided the Israelites in their victory over the Philistines. The stone, standing up-right, was called "Ebenezer," and the site naturally took on that name as well. The root of the word Ebenezer means “Stone of Help” and refers to a place where God's presence was known.

So, literally speaking, an Ebenezer is a "stone of help," or a reminder of God's Real, Holy Presence and Divine aid. Spiritually and theologically speaking, an Ebenezer can be nearly anything that reminds us of God's presence and help: the Bible, a hymn, a picture, the rising sun, a bright fluorescent card in your purse or wallet, a photograph, a piece of art, a lighted candle, a favorite stone or shell – anything which serves as reminders of God's love, God's Real Presence, and God's assistance is an "Ebenezer." Remember Bishop George Bashore? He suggested at my ordination that every morning when we wash our face (or shave it if that is your morning ritual!) we take a handful of water and intentionally splash it on our brow remembering our baptism and to whom we belong. Such an action is an Ebenezer. Throughout the day, create your own Ebenezer's. How easy it is to lose a *Gratitude Attitude* between morning and night! Let your Ebenezers remind you of your own radical gratitude.

Another important practice is to stay connected to Holy Trinity, your beloved community. Enjoy the fellowship, the friendships, the ministries that we share. Consider it a privilege to be a part of this church. Support it with your prayers, your presence, your gifts and service and bear

witness to others of the importance of Holy Trinity in your life. And remember, what you see and experience here on Sundays and throughout the week doesn't just happen. It costs money and we are the only ones who can support the programs, the staff and the cost of keeping our facility heated, lighted, cleaned and repaired. Oh! I hope that you have been praying that through each of our generosity to our church that we can close the gap on a deficit budget this year!

Last week we reflected on the importance of tithing to our church, of giving back to God the first 10% of our income, the "first fruits" of our labors. We imagined that God gives us 10 apples and wants us to give the first apple back to God for God's work! But getting to the place where we can give 10% of our income to the church takes time and intention. It means being serious about our finances, budgeting our expenses and living within those guidelines. And we recognized that getting out of debt will be the one way that we can be as generous as we wish we could be. Remember 10. 10. 80. Give away 10%. Save 10% for emergencies and live on 80% of whatever income you have.

All of this points to the final practice which is to live a simpler life style. Be satisfied with what you already have; in fact, be extraordinarily grateful for what you already have. Something dynamic and liberating happens when we integrate a *Gratitude Attitude* with the awareness that "it is enough."

There is a story told of the great medieval mystic Teresa of Avila that illustrates my point. It seems she had a picture of Jesus hanging in her room. And the picture was set in a gold frame. One night Teresa awoke with a great sense of guilt and was seized with a sense that the frame was too expensive and that perhaps she should give it away as she had taken a vow of poverty. However, she soon heard a "voice" that said "Do whatever leads to love." The next day she reflected on the voice in the night and knew that a simpler lifestyle made sense only in the context of the economy of love. In other words, if having the gold frame helped her to become more loving, then she would keep it. If the gold frame made her less loving, then she would give it away. So it could be for each of us. What is it that we have and want that leads us to greater gratitude? that leads to being more loving? And what is it that will hinder the liberation of gratitude in our lives? that reflects selfishness rather than the love of neighbor near and far? (Leddy, p. 157)

I hope that this stewardship series on gratitude has awakened in you a *Gratitude Attitude*. I truly believe that such an attitude has the capacity to transform every aspect of our living.

Now, one final story. (as recorded in Vaughn's *Radical Gratitude*, pp 235 – 7) Though this one is fiction, and familiar, it too gives a picture of how thankfulness for God's extraordinary grace can compel us every ordinary day for the rest of our lives.

In Victor Hugo's 1862 *Les Miserables*, a man named Jean Valjean has been imprisoned for nineteen years at hard labor, in horrific conditions, for stealing a loaf of bread. He has survived his imprisonment by stoking schemes of revenge. Finally, he is released. He finds a construction job. But at the end of the day he is given half wages because he's an ex-convict.

His anger boils. Then he is taken in for the night by the Bishop of Digne, as godly a character as can be found in literature.

The bishop shares his soup, bread, and wine. Valjean notes the heavy silver serving spoon and cutlery; he marks where they are stored. He figures they are worth double what he earned in the pitiful prison wages of nineteen long years, time that the government stole from him. In the middle of the night he sneaks to the cupboard, pulls out the silver basket, and flees into the night.

The next morning the bishop is up at sunrise and it is soon discovered that the fine silver is missing. Unruffled, the bishop eats his breakfast. As he rises from the table there is a commotion at the door. A group of policemen drag in a wild-eyed Jean Valjean. They had noticed him “acting like a convict,” arrested him and found the bishop’s silver.

The bishop approaches Valjean, who is full of fear, shame and despair.

“Ah, there you are!” the bishop says, smiling. “I’m glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn’t you take them along with your cutlery?”

Jean Valjean stares at the bishop, astonished. The bishop takes the heavy, silver candlesticks from the mantle, presses them into Valjean’s hands, and tells the policemen to go. They reluctantly release their prisoner. After they leave, the bishop whispers to Valjean: “Do not forget, ever, that you have promised to use this silver to become an honest man.”

Valjean, dumbfounded, does not recall any such thing. But the bishop continues: “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

Valjean stumbles away. He wrestles all that day with this Christlike grace, unable to accept that he can accept it. But by three o’clock the following morning, he is kneeling on the bishop’s front step in prayer, surrendering his life to the God he knows only by the bishop’s gift.

Forever grateful for the canceled debt he could never pay back, Jean Valjean pays it forward for the rest of his life. He eventually becomes mayor of a nearby town, manages a factory to help the poor, saves the life of a farmer who hates him, protects the weak and helps the needy. Given the opportunity to exact revenge on the police inspector who has hounded him for years, he instead pardons him and lets him go.

Sacrificially doing good for others flowed directly from Valjean’s jaw-dropping experience of grace. He knew he deserved absolutely nothing but to be thrown back into prison. But the good bishop saved his soul, declared him innocent, his slate clean, and gave him lavish gifts. The rest of Jean Valjean’s story is about radical gratitude.

Given what we have received, what will be the rest of our story? What we decide to give back to God for the work of this church is a significant part of our story. May it be extravagantly generous and given with extravagant joy. Amen and Amen.

