

Gratitude

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Genesis 45:1-15

Today we are beginning a three-part sermon series on Gratitude, which you may have noted goes well with our upcoming November Holiday “Thanksgiving”. I know that often in my celebrations of Thanksgiving with family and friends we often take time around our shared meal to say what we are *grateful* for. Which sometimes leads to a meaningful conversation and other times leads to what feels like an obligatory listing of things; a sort of a way of paying penance for all the copious amounts of food we are all about to eat :)

As we approach this holiday, however, in my own spiritual life I have been feeling called to the practice of Gratitude and wondering if gratitude might have a deeper purpose and wondering how the spiritual practice of gratitude might deepen my prayer life, my connection to my community, and my sense of purpose in this world.

I have mentioned to many of you, that one of my life long struggles in this world is living with Anxiety; anxiety being a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness, and often I feel anxious even if nothing anxiety inducing is occurring in my life. Anxiety is literally an experience of neurons bouncing between nerves in your brain causing one/ me to feel full of dread and impending doom. And I’m confident that I am not the only one here today who lives with anxiety. There is a lot of evidence that a significant portion of the population is living with varying degrees of anxiety. The fast-paced, demanding nature of modern life, compounded by factors like economic stress, social pressures, and the rapid pace of ever-changing technology, contributes to a general sense of unease. Not to mention, the pressures of careers, financial responsibilities, and the societal impact of major events, such as a pandemic, and unfolding wars and violence occurring throughout our world. All of this seems to exacerbate feelings of apprehension and uncertainty. And leaves many experiencing sleepless nights as they try to come to terms with a gnawing sense of dread and anxiety in the pit of their stomach.

I bring up anxiety because there is a lot of research and evidence that gratitude can be an antidote to anxiety. Gratitude is the balm to the neurons bouncing back and forth in our brains. One article I read this week stated:

Gratitude in all forms is associated with happiness. Whether we say ‘thank you’ to someone or receive the same from others, the feeling it brings is that of pure satisfaction and encouragement. Expressions of gratitude help in building and sustaining long term relationships, deal with adversities and bounce back from them with strength and motivation.[1]

An article Susan Bartram sent me this week about the role of Gratitude in solving climate change states:

Gratitude is the natural response to benevolence, whether that benefactor is a stranger, a loved one, the planet, or the divine. When grateful we affirm that we have received an unearned good and recognize

that this good comes from outside of us. Gratitude is a way of being that is grounded in the invitation to see life as a gift. It comes with the realization that these gifts are not to be squandered. We look up and we look out and see how our lives are sustained and supported by forces that transcend our individual lives. We see that life provides sufficiency and surplus. We remember how we are bound to the world that surrounds us.

In light of this, we turn to the End of Genesis where our scripture reading today is found. Our Scripture reading is the end of the narrative about Joseph. Joseph is the great grandson of Abraham, the youngest son of Jacob. It is interesting to note that the narrative about Joseph is a very long narrative to read. All of Joseph's story you would read Genesis chapter 37-50. This section of scripture is often referred to as the *Joseph novella*. It is a complicated story with many twists and turns; but to give you a brief overview, Joseph is Jacob's eleventh son, but in his father Jacob's eyes, he is the sun and the moon, the favorite, the most special, and this status is not a secret to anyone; everyone knows, especially his 10 older brothers, who surprisingly do not share this opinion with their father. They are jealous and annoyed by their younger brother. Along with being the youngest adored child, Joseph is also a dreamer and a dream interpreter, a gift given to him by God, but when Joseph recounts his dreams to his brothers he comes across as arrogant and problematic.

Eventually the jealousy and rivalry leads to Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery. And Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave. In Egypt Joseph rises to prominence as a servant in the household of a man named Potiphar. However, he is falsely accused of a crime and incarcerated. In prison, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams comes to light, which after a series of events leads Joseph to be summoned to Pharaoh's court to interpret a troubling dream of Pharaoh's. Joseph is able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which were a warning of a coming famine. Joseph advises him to store grain for the tough times ahead. Impressed with Joseph's wisdom, Pharaoh makes him a powerful leader in Egypt. And as predicted, a severe famine strikes, and eventually Joseph's family comes to Egypt in search of food.

Our scripture reading today is the account of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers. When his brothers arrived in Egypt, they did not recognize him because they were not able to imagine that Joseph would be in a place of such prominence or power. So eventually Joseph must tell them who he is. Joseph could have easily held onto his anger and resentment and punished his brothers for all the suffering they had caused him. No one would have blamed him for taking that course of action. But that is not how the story unfolds. Our scripture reading states: Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Somehow Joseph is able to see this situation through God's viewpoint which allowed him to see his brothers through the lens of Grace and Gratitude. When I read this story, I think that there is no way that Joseph should have been able to forgive anyone – too much harm and pain happened. I think it is a miracle that he is able to forgive.

Karl Barth, in *Church Dogmatics* states: Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder and lightning.

The practice of Gratitude transformed Joseph's experience from one of pain and sorrow to an experience of care and abundance. Joseph understands that his life's journey, including the betrayal and hardships, has served a greater purpose. In Genesis chp 50 Joseph tells his brothers: You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done.

Gratitude helped him transcend his personal pain, focusing instead on the unfolding divine plan. Gratitude is not a practice of ignoring all the things happening in the world, but rather is a transformative practice that reframes our lives and work in the world and helps us see God's handiwork in our lives no matter what current circumstances are.

Joseph's gratitude goes hand in hand with his ability to forgive. Joseph recognizes that his brothers' actions, though wrong, were ultimately part of a larger plan, orchestrated by God. By letting go of bitterness and extending forgiveness, Joseph demonstrates that gratitude can be a catalyst for personal transformation. Forgiveness becomes the bridge that connects gratitude to the healing of relationships and the mending of his family.

Joseph's story is a testament to the transformative power of gratitude. It teaches us that by cultivating the spiritual practice of gratitude, we can rise above our personal grievances, find the bigger picture, and discover the strength to forgive. Gratitude not only changes our hearts but also has the potential to mend broken relationships and bring about unity and healing to our world. Gratitude (much like sabbath) is not a practice that we get to "when we have the time" rather it is an important and necessary practice that changes our internal world that will also impact and transform the world around us.

So.... How do we start practicing Gratitude?

A. It's a practice, not an emotion. Like all spiritual disciplines it takes practice, and it is not always easy. It is the sort of thing that we have to deliberately cultivate on a daily basis.

B. And, like all things that are hard it gets easier the more we practice. If I go to the gym I can't immediately bench press 100 pounds; rather, I have to start small and with practice and discipline I can lift heavier and heavier weights, and so we have to strengthen our emotional muscles to cultivate gratitude during the most trying of circumstances.

C. When we feel the pressures of anxiety, creeping in, that is a red flag that we need to change our perspective and practice Gratitude. When the worrying anxious thoughts start to go round and round, this is an invitation to change the narrative and focus on what you are grateful for. For me this is a hard practice but also one of immense worth, turning the switch to stop thinking of what I am lacking and/or needing to the view of what I am grateful for is difficult, but truly rewarding.

D. Finally, be gracious with ourselves when we practice gratitude, realize that we will never be perfect and never be free of being human, but rather with God's help we can cultivate a little more gratitude each day.

Author Ann Lamott Writes:

When we go from rashy and clenched to grateful, we sometimes get to note the experience of grace, in knowing that we could not have gotten ourselves from where we were stuck, in hate

or self-righteousness or self-loathing (which are the same thing), to freedom. The movement of grace in our lives toward freedom is the mystery. So we simply say “Thanks.” Something had to open, something had to give, and I don’t have a clue how to get things to do that. But they did, or grace did. ¹

Let us Pray: Loving God, we seek your guidance and strength in cultivating gratitude and forgiveness in In a world filled with challenges and uncertainties, help us to see the blessings that surround us and the bigger picture of your divine plan, just as Joseph did in his journey. Grant us the wisdom and grace to release the burdens of anger and resentment, and help us to embrace forgiveness, knowing that it is through your love and grace that we find healing and reconciliation. May we all be transformed through the practice of gratitude and find that we have come to know you more fully. Amen

¹ *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*