

“*Grounded in Gratitude*” preached at EUMC on **Thanksgiving Sunday** 11-25-07
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James texts: Matthew 6:25-33 & I Thessalonians 5:12-24

I begin this morning with a bar scene in a **short story** by Carson McCuller. It’s closing time, close to dawn. A seedy old man has pulled his head out of his beer mug long enough to collar a twelve-year-old boy on his paper route.

He starts to philosophize to the boy. He says, “People fall in love for the first time. And what do they fall in love with? Each other. With nothing to go by, they undertake the most dangerous and sacred experience in God’s earth. They start at the wrong end of love. They begin at the climax. Can you wonder it is so miserable? Do you know how people *should* love?”

The old man reaches over and grasps the boy by the collar of his leather jacket. He gives him a gentle shake, and his green eyes gaze down, unblinking and grave. “Son, do you know how love should be begun?”

The boy sits small and listening and still. Slowly he shakes his head. The old man leans closer and whispers: “*A tree. A rock. A cloud.*”

That’s a truth as pure as gold. Probably no human enterprise starts with such high expectations, and fails with such regularity, as love. And here is one of the reasons: people think that it’s easy to love; the only hard thing is to find the right object. That’s like saying it’s easy to play the organ; the hard thing is to find the right music.

“Son, do you know how love should be begun?... *A tree. A rock. A cloud.*” Do you hear in that line an echo of the teachings of Jesus? “Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field.”

Love begins where life is most daily, when something catches you unaware and touches your heart. Love starts with something that is simply there, to be appreciated: a tree, a rock, a cloud. Love begins with **gratitude**.ⁱ

I know that this is true because the greatest lovers I know of---the greatest lovers of life and other people and God---have all been people whose basic posture toward life is one of gratefulness. Think of Jesus, St. Francis, Hildegard of Bingen---they have a characteristic spirituality that says, “Thank you, God, for this beautiful world. Thank you for my life.” And I don’t even have to go that far. In my own circle of family and friends, I am taught all the time that **gratitude is the fertile ground out of which grows the capacity to love.**

I think, for instance, of my friend Sally, one of the dear ones in my life. Sally and I went to seminary together; she is now the pastor of a church up in Anacortes. Sally is a person who gets so much joy out of just being alive, she is a joy to be with. She can become rapturous over a hot cinnamon roll and coffee, say, or a new idea she heard about on NPR, or a walk in the rain. When you go walking with Sally, your arm can get sore from

all the times she grabs it to say, “Oh, look at that!” Look at that sunlight shooting through the cloud, or look at that little boy with the big dog, or look at the way that oil in the water makes a rainbow in the street.

Sally is one of the most deeply happy people I know. She has been a spiritual guide for me, teaching me that happiness springs not from how much you have, but from how much you enjoy.

Do you know someone like that? Someone who gets a charge out of just being alive? I find such people so appealing. They are the opposite of those who are self-pitying and mean-spirited and small. What is their secret? There really is no mystery to it, Sally would say. Happiness is a product of gratitude. **And gratitude is a posture toward life that you can cultivate, even though it begins...with surprise.**

I read about an old man, celebrating his 100th birthday, being interviewed by reporters. One of the reporters asked him, “How do you feel when you wake up each morning?” The man answered, “Surprised.”

It was Plato who said that surprise is the beginning of wisdom. What he meant was that surprise is the first step in **recognizing that life is a gift.**ⁱⁱ

- A mother looks at her baby asleep in the crib every afternoon, yet one day the sight strikes her as so tremendous that her whole heart is stunned, and flooded with a gratefulness too deep for words.
- A hiker is walking through the woods, when suddenly a deer materializes from nowhere. The human and the animal stand transfixed in the stillness, contemplating one another.
- A college student is studying at 4:00 a.m. with a friend, poring over a stack of books. She looks up, and there across the table is her friend’s familiar face, puckered in concentration, glasses sliding down his nose. A sudden, surprising tenderness wells up inside her, so intense as to be almost painful.

Have you experienced moments like those? Moments when some beauty, or some mystery, or even some pain has come upon you, taken you by surprise, and touched your heart? Such moments have a transcendental quality to them, a certain “beyondness” that is the beginning of wisdom. That’s because surprise calls us out of ourselves and helps us know that we are not the center of the universe, that we cannot take ultimate credit for what is or what happens in this world. There is, at such times, the awareness that life *comes* to us, gratuitously, that *life is first of all a gift*, which is what all our religious language about *grace* is trying to convey.

Surprise is the beginning of gratitude. But **gratitude deepens when we make it a practice.** No one is born giving thanks, just as no one is born looking for things to complain about. These are attitudes that are *learned*. We teach our children to be thankful when we point out the wonders of the world to them, like Sally saying, look at this! Think of that! This may be one of the best gifts we can give our children, for if

they learn to appreciate the beauties of life, and to regard this world as a theater of grace, they will always be rich, whatever their circumstances. Thanksgiving becomes not just a holiday but a way of living every day. *“Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field.”*

Over the years I have come to believe that gratefulness is the most basic posture of true religion. This is because the **awareness that life is a gift implies something else: acknowledgement of a Giver.** Listen to these words from a Japanese Zen master:

The other day I was walking along the river...The wind was blowing. Suddenly I thought, “Oh! The air really exists.” We know that the air is there, but unless the wind blows against our faces, we are not aware of it. Here in the wind I was suddenly aware, yes, it’s really there. And the sun too. I was suddenly aware of the sun, shining through the bare trees. Its warmth, its brightness, and all this completely free, completely gratuitous.

And without me knowing it, completely spontaneously, my two hands came together, and I realized that I was making *gassho*. And it occurred to me that this is all that matters: that we can bow, take a deep bow. Just that. Just that.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is so different from an attitude of complaining, demanding, whining at God to do this or that for us! When our eyes are opened, and we perceive the given-ness of life, our most natural impulse is to give thanks and praise to God.

By now, however, some of you are probably thinking: that’s all fine and good. Gratitude is a beautiful thing. **But what about when life is not good?** I don’t *feel* thankful, not after what has happened to me. I lost my business. I lost the one I love. I didn’t get what I wanted. I suffered this terrible thing. How can I possibly give thanks to God? Someone is thinking, “My life is not all grace; my life is one crisis after another.” Perhaps someone is even thinking: “Why should I thank God? I prayed for help and God did not answer my prayers. What has God ever done for me?”

The Bible has a strange response to this. It’s found in the writings of Paul, in our second scripture reading for today. You remember that Paul’s life was filled with hardships, and so were the lives of the Thessalonians to whom he was writing. In fact, they were being persecuted by the emperor of Rome at the time. But Paul writes this to the Christians at Thessalonica: *“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances.”*

Gratefulness in the midst of tribulation is a powerful affirmation of faith. The fact is, the Bible never promises that God is going to rescue us from suffering. The Bible promises that God will be with us, even in the midst of suffering. We can give thanks for that. We can claim it, when hardships come. It may even be that **the difficult times are the times in which we need to give thanks most of all.**

I can't say that I understand this, but as a pastor, I know it's true. How many times have I gone to visit someone in the hospital, someone who is facing serious surgery, say, or who has just received a terrifying diagnosis. We pray together, and what do they pray?

They pray, "Dear God, thank you for being with me through this. Thank you that you will not abandon me, no matter what. Thank you for all the people who love me, and all those who are praying for me. Thank you for the skill of my doctors and nurses. Thank you, God, that whatever comes next, I know you can bring the best things even out of the worst things. Thank you that I am not alone."

You know what? These people know a peace in the midst of suffering that those who cannot give thanks at such a time can never know. They have a source of strength and courage that others cannot comprehend. They have discovered the secret that Paul writes about when he says, writing from prison, "I have learned how to be content in all circumstances." The secret is: gratitude. **The secret is that gratitude produces happiness, not the other way around.**

Several years ago, I called my friend Sally on Thanksgiving Day. I was worried about her. She had just moved to a new city, in which she knew no one yet. She had taken a job at extremely low pay, and rented an apartment in a run-down section of town. I thought she might be lonely on Thanksgiving, with no family or friends with whom to share a meal. So I called her up to say hello.

When Sally answered the phone, I wished her a happy Thanksgiving. She said, "Oh, it *has* been a happy Thanksgiving!" "It has?" I asked. "What have you been doing?"

She said, "Well, I brewed up a pot of my favorite tea, put it in a thermos, and strapped the thermos to the back of my bike. Then I rode my bike for two hours up into the hills overlooking the city. I stopped at the top where there is a little park, sat down and leaned back against a tree, and drank my tea, looking out over all the houses all the way to the bay. It was so beautiful! The sunlight shone on the water.. I've just now gotten home. What are you doing?"

I had to smile at my friend. I think you could pick Sally up and drop her into any situation in the world and she would find a way to be happy. Because you see, Sally has learned the secret: that gratitude produces happiness, not happiness gratitude. Wherever she goes and whatever she experiences---even the loneliness, even the hardships---Sally receives and embraces. **Grounded in gratitude**, her life flows out of a deep sense of fullness and joy, rather than emptiness and need. Therefore, more than anyone else I know, Sally is able to love.

But it all begins, as the old man in the bar says, with a tree, a rock, a cloud. It begins when something catches you unaware, and touches your heart. It continues when you **make a practice of gratefulness, rejoicing, giving thanks to God in everything.**

That is how love should be begun. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to William Sloan Coffin for this reference, which I read about in his sermon entitled, “A Spiral of Joy,” preached at Riverside Church in New York City, on March 2, 1986

ⁱⁱ For a wonderful book about this, see Brother David Stendl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), especially Chapter 2, pp. 9-25

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks also to Coffin for this story, unreferenced in his sermon