

John 6: 1-13

Start with Gratitude

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This month our worship theme is Wholeness. What are the essential qualities of a rewarding life? What makes life full? What does it take to make you really happy? This series follows our month-long study of Jesus, and so it is appropriate to ask what Jesus can tell us about how to be happy? How can his life influence ours when we seek meaning and purpose each day? How do we know if we are doing it right?

This series includes 4 topics- integrity, balance, gratitude and spirituality. Each week we will look at a different component of a life that is whole. Each week we examine a different quality that makes life fulfilling. The first two sermons of this series are on the website. Today we will focus on gratitude.

This week our topic is gratitude. [Psychology Today](#)'s website ran a feature this week on gratitude. Gratitude is the appreciation of what one has. The site is promoting gratitude as a deliberate attitude that can foster happiness and well-being. Grateful living is associated with increased levels of energy and optimism and empathy. People are all in the thanksgiving mode this week, so you might be wondering what more can possibly be said on this topic? What can the church bring to this conversation? How is our religious message any different from the secular thanksgiving?

In the midst of all this national thankfulness, it is easy to overlook the fact that the congregational church is the group that invented thanksgiving. We come from the pilgrims; they are our ancestors in faith. But even the pilgrims did not invent gratitude. It has deep roots in the Bible. While the congregational church has refined the message of thanksgiving over many decades now, it was Jesus

himself who lived with such a sense of gratitude that his followers realized that his sense of blessing at the core of him was integral to his ability to be happy, no matter what happened to him.

Somehow Jesus lived with few possessions and felt rich. He lived in utter obscurity and felt like the whole world was at his to enjoy. He lived with so few advantages and so many challenges – but woke up grateful for the gift of life each day. Nothing and no one could take away his sense of abundance. It was not just that he saw the glass half full. He saw the glass of life as being full. He showed his followers how gratitude can change your life.

What can our faith teach us about gratitude, and how does being grateful make you happy and fulfilled.

In the first place, Jesus says, start with gratitude. In our Bible story today we see that Jesus and his disciples had a real problem. As Christ's popularity grew he pushed his events further and further out into the countryside. That was the only way to accommodate the crowds of hundreds and hundreds of people who were gathering when he spoke about life and faith. So one day when they sat long into the afternoon listening to Jesus the disciples grew nervous. This crowd was topping out at 5000, and people had nothing to eat and nowhere to find food, Most of the families had been out since dawn, and they could not go all day and then start walking home without some food. So the disciples urged Jesus to cut it short and send them home. But Jesus asked for food and a child brought his loaves and fish. Then Jesus had everyone sit down and he prayed, thanking God for what they had. He started with prayer. Even in a crisis, he started with prayer.

Most of us do not come out of seminary knowing how to pray. Even if we have read a book about prayer and studied God nothing really prepares you to pray. Prayer is like meeting someone and making a friend, building a relationship. Seminary is all about your head, and good prayer comes from the heart. You grope your way in the dark many days. But I learned the hard way that the best prayers start with thanksgiving. As a young pastor I got used to praying in worship or at the beginning or end of

a meeting. But the prayers that scared me were the ones when people needed prayer most – when someone died, and the platform of life was shaking. When the tests were uncertain, and no one knew the answers, when the cancer had metastasized and you did know what to say. So in those prayers when life seemed so uncertain and hope was hanging in the balance, I learned to start with thanksgiving. I would bow my head and find something to be thankful for, often something simple we took for granted. Gratitude began to ground me. When you start with gratitude you remind yourself that life is not in your hands. You remind yourself that this is God’s world, and you are not in charge. You remember that things may seem out of your control but God is in control .

I have seen folks on Facebook listing things they are grateful for. They are being intentional about gratitude. There is a project on line called The Gratitude Experiment. 1.5 million people have joined in 153 countries. The idea is that you practice gratitude for 42 days and it will change your life. Since its conception in November 2005 the Gratitude has gone viral as people are more and more aware of the connection between gratitude in happiness. Google trends reports that searches on the topic gratitude have doubled. When you prioritize gratitude, you start to look for things to be grateful for. The website claims are that it will change your life – give you energy, help your relationships, enhance your sense of well-being.

Start with gratitude.

In the second place, gratitude is not an attitude that separates you from others. A lot of people think that gratitude is the ability to see what you have, and be gracious enough to acknowledge how lucky you are, compared to others. Jesus told a story about two people who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee who prayed, “I thank God that I am not like other people.” Jesus pointed out that this way of giving thanks was not pleasing to God. It is smug and lacks grace. It is basically disdainful of

others. His is not a generous spirit, but a self-righteous piety. He congratulates himself for his good fortune. That is not gratitude.

But it passes for gratitude sometimes. You have heard people say, "This thanksgiving I am grateful that I don't have to live on the street like those raggedy homeless people I see in the subway." "I am grateful that I did not lose my house in the mortgage crisis like those folks." "I am grateful that I went to a good school and have so many things that money can buy." Many things that pass for gratitude are really a cleverly disguised form of self-congratulation.

Gratitude humbles you; it never puffs you up. It reminds you of your blessings and quiets all your yearnings till you feel something sacred come over you.

Finally, gratitude is a decision you make. When Jesus prayed that day he held confusion at bay. He refused to be overwhelmed by the major catering problem at hand. He was gracious but neither was he in denial about the situation. He knew that there were 5000 people and only a little food. He saw the dilemma but he was not willing to be overwhelmed by it. He was not a cock-eyed optimist, but as he thanks God for the small portion of one little boy he refused to give into despair. Plunging into despair takes energy away from you. As the crisis swirled around him, Jesus found a way to be grateful and that made a difference.

The Bible says that a miracle happened on that hill where 5000 people were fed. The Bible never tells us exactly what happened. This miraculous transformation that fed all those people remains something of a mystery. In the absence of much information we assume the Jesus closed his eyes and when he opened them the fish had multiplied into huge load of barrels or fish, and the bread became mammoth containers of hundreds of loaves. But the Bible does not mention that, which I would assume it would. Maybe a caravan of traders suddenly showed up on the horizon, but the Bible does not mention this. Or was the miracle much more subtle? Maybe the little boy's generosity shamed them a

little, and then Jesus' prayer of thanks made them open their own supper provisions and share. Did people listen to Jesus' prayer and suddenly get in touch with the abundance they already had? Instead of feeling stingy, maybe they found that suddenly the food they had socked away in their pocket was something that they might share. Maybe the miracle was not magic, but graciousness borne out of a sense of thanksgiving.

John Buchanan, Editor of Christian Century, wrote a column about gratitude. As a child he had a vexing way of refusing to thank his grandmother for her gifts. His parents would hover over him expecting him to call her and thank her for her cards that came for his birthday. He loved the cards and appreciated the \$5 bill she sent. He would grab the cash, but he kept postponing his call to his grandmother. Finally they stood over him while he dialed the phone. Over time he admits the feeling of gratitude caught up with him but he had to practice it, and they had to insist on it.

Learning to be thankful is one of the most basic parts of wholesome living. At the heart of the Bible in the Book of Psalms there is one prose hymn after another full of thanksgiving. The Psalms show that the people of faith learned to live with gratitude in good times and bad. So the people learned to thank God for the gift of life. C.S. Lewis writes that grateful people are emotionally healthy. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”¹

The hymn after the sermon is a favorite of many. The story of how it was written makes it more precious still. I honestly don't know how Martin Rinkert wrote this hymn; but perhaps it was in writing it that he found his faith and held onto it. A German pastor in the walled city of Eisleben during the horrors of the Thirty Years War he wrote “Now Thank We All Our God” in 1647 after burying many of his parishioners, among them his own wife. The hymn is not a dirge or funeral march. It is an ode to life's blessings.

¹ “Duty and Delight” by John M. Buchanan Christian Century Nov. 14, 2012 p. 3

When you come down to it what makes thanksgiving a good holiday is not the bounty, but it is the sharing. It is not the personalities at the table, but it is the way that they have brushed against us and the friction of those relationships over the years has worn some smooth places in our souls. If we are honest, we have to admit that there will be times during these holidays when we feel stingy, and wounded, confused, and gracious. Being thankful is a discipline, even on Thanksgiving. Go easy on yourself. Don't strive for a perfect meal; pray for a reasonably gracious one. Start early in the week of Thanksgiving remembering what you are really grateful for. Who knows? You may be surprised. Your genuine gratitude may grow, and even change you.