

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
October 15, 2023  
Spiritual practices – thankfulness

I am grateful this morning that there are no rockets raining down around us, that no militants are roaming our streets and abducting random innocents. That we are not being evacuated and our homes destroyed. I am thankful that despite my kids' educational challenges, they are getting educations, and that we have a mortgage that we can afford. I'm grateful for food, and the clean water that comes from our faucets. I am grateful for blue sky days where we can breathe freely. I am grateful for the occasional elk sightings along my drive and for my vacation time, that I can go exploring in the natural places that feel to me like holy places, for my fly rods and for the grounding activity of tying flies. In a world full of strangers, I'm grateful for those few friends who really know me.

I could go on, and should go on. And I invite you to think of what your own log of thankfulness would sound like. What would be included? I am working at this, working at being more disciplined in being thankful for the blessings of my life. It is not my natural proclivity. This is really Tom Roth's territory. In fact, I thought about just having him preach today. This is his constant message. "It is hard to have a bad day," we've heard him say repeatedly, "if you have a thankful heart." This is a regular spiritual practice for Tom, praying his list of thanks each morning, framing his day and his frame of mind with a spirit of thankfulness.

I have heard the call to thankfulness used as a bludgeon towards others too many times. When someone complains or laments or calls out injustice, they have too often been quieted by the charge to be grateful for what they have. The reality is that the cause of righteousness and justice have always been advanced by a degree of discontent, of unwillingness to accept things as they are and to advocate for doing better. The health of community comes from those who advocate and who do not accept the status quo. The health of hearts comes in part by being able to express all experiences and emotions, including lament and complaint and those cries of injustice.

When I think of both our Exodus reading and our Thessalonians reading, I think a central concern in both passages is that of the nurturing and the health of the faith community. Guiding the faith community in being to be faithful to the Lord and to being a unified community who reflects the Lord's purpose and care for them. In Exodus, it is biblical Israel as they are leaving the heavy hand of enslavement and as they journey through the wilderness and as they anticipate being a people in the

land, learning to let God govern themselves and to deal with the unknowns and stresses of freedom. And in the Thessalonians passage it is the early church trying to find its path among the myriad of challenges and conflicts and ideologies that can so easily divide them from one another and weaken the church.

Justice and advocating are important to building such a community, such a vision of faith, of God's kingdom. But I've been thinking this week of the role that thankfulness and contentment also plays in community. So we might ask this morning, in what way does our ability and willingness to be thankful nurture and build up a sense of healthy community?

I think of the ten words in Exodus. While we know them as the ten commandments, in Hebrew it the ten devarim – ten words, the ten things. God is saying you are different than other nations and people and we are going to make a little charter so you remember. Here are the ten things. And they don't actually read like commandments in Hebrew grammar. They read more straightforwardly. This is who you are, and this is how you will live.

These ten things speak to worshipping the Lord and no other, and not trying to leverage and bend God to our own wills by not using or invoking the Lord's name vainly, or worshipping other gods, or keeping other images, and by setting ourselves apart through sabbath and rest and the trust it requires. And then of the community and relationships to one another – for what would lead to murder and lying and stealing but a sense of selfishness, of fear, of unresolved anger, or putting your needs higher than your neighbors, or competing with each other for limited resources? And how important it was in God's eyes, to include among these top ten, the issue of coveting, of jealousy, of comparing one's life to another and holding some kind of grudge or bitterness or desire for what other's have.

It is ingrained in our society and in the success of marketing – making you feel that you are missing out on some thing that will make your life easier or you more successful or cool or comfortable. We are supposed to want what others' have. We are supposed to want more. We are supposed to think, it is the American way to think, that I can have what you have if I just work hard enough for it. And it draws attention to our different fortunes. It makes me compare my life to yours. Makes me compare the challenges I feel to the good fortunes that you post on Facebook, as if life is always so rosy. Comparison is the thief of joy. It is the seed of discord.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your

neighbor.” Right up there with taking someone’s life or stealing their resources or lying to their face is wanting what they have.

Perhaps I cannot truly give my heart and energy and worship to the Lord if I am not willing to see my own blessings, if I am not willing to be thankful, if I am not able to discern how God has been at work in my life, in my circumstances. And perhaps I cannot truly love my neighbor and be in community with one another unless I am willing to accept you and your fortune just as I am willing to accept my own.

“Few tell us,” expresses our poet this morning, “that wonder and awe / are decisions we make daily, hourly, / minute by minute in the tiny offices / of the heart—tilting the head to look up / at every tree turned into a chandelier / by light striking ice in just the right way.”

Wonder, awe, thankfulness, community, kindness, mutual support – decisions we make daily, hourly, minute by minute in the tiny offices of the heart.

In our gospel reading, a good day turns to controversy by the grumbling of a few. Bill Sanders preached on this passage just a few weeks ago focusing on the theme of justice, of the limitations of fairness, and the standard of caring for one another, of each receiving what they need. But if we read this same passage through the lens of thankfulness, what stands out to us? I know for me what stands out is that the grumbling comes from a few and overshadows it all. The grumbling comes from those that did receive what they needed that day. They had work, they were paid. It did not come from anybody who did not receive work or payment that day. It was from those that did get the wage they needed to feed their families that day. But they compared their circumstances to others. They were jealous of their ease, saw their two experiences as being unfair – how could they have the same as I have? But how would the story change if they were grateful and thankful for what they received that day, for going home to their families able to provide that day and did not begrudge what others received?

Paul admonishes the Thessalonians in a number of ways in our epistle reading, all aiming at keeping this early church focused on Christ, their calling, and on the unity of their fellowship, lest they slowly fall apart through one small thing after another. He appeals to them to respect their leaders and those that admonish them. Then he says: “Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all

circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.”

Give thanks in all circumstances. Even in the challenges, can we find the blessings, can we see God as present and caring and active? Can we cultivate soft and open hearts in those times rather than angry, complaining and frustrated hearts.

And finally, I wonder if gratefulness and thankfulness and contentment, when cultivated, might actually help us pursue justice and each other’s needs – because I can be present to what you need without comparing it to what I have or don’t have. I don’t need to compare it to hard I’ve had to work or haven’t had to work. Yes, perhaps the willingness to be thankful in all circumstances, to choose to be content and not to covet or envy what others have, whether possessions, or circumstances, or events, then we might be able to be present, to care, to help, to let go of our bitterness and attitudes and jealousy. “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit.”

It’s a shiver that climbs the trellis  
of the spine, each tingle a bright white  
morning glory breaking into blossom  
beneath the skin. It can happen anywhere,  
anytime, even finding this sleeve of ice  
worn by a branch all morning, now fallen  
on a bed of snow. You can choose to pause,  
pick it up, hold the cold thing in your hand  
or not. Few tell us that wonder and awe  
are decisions we make daily, hourly,  
minute by minute in the tiny offices  
of the heart—tilting the head to look up  
at every tree turned into a chandelier  
by light striking ice in just the right way.

And we, we who know of God’s redemptive hope and purposes, how much more do we have reason to be thankful, reason to find wonder and awe and gratefulness and the ability to be present to one another without comparison or envy, more able to love our neighbors, and to follow the example of Christ.

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. Do not quench the Spirit.

And all God's people said...

Exodus 20: 1-17    *The Ten Commandments*  
(Deut 5:1-22)

**20** Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

<sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

<sup>12</sup> Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Matthew 20: 1-16

Parable of the laborers through the lens of gratitude and thankfulness

*The Laborers in the Vineyard*

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

*I Thessalonians 5:12-24 -- Final Exhortations, Greetings, and Benediction*

<sup>12</sup> But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; <sup>13</sup> esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. <sup>14</sup> And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. <sup>15</sup> See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.