

Sermon for Pentecost XVIII Year C
Stewardship Week I—*Gratitude*

This is the first week of our annual Stewardship campaign.

Actually, I don't think that is an accurate way to describe the next three weeks.

You see, all of our faith life is a practice of stewardship.

And our Stewardship team is very good at encouraging our generosity in a variety of ways all throughout the year—not just these three weeks.

What these three weeks we call our “annual Stewardship campaign” are really all about is a campaign to encourage you to

make a commitment to giving – not anonymously or just in your heart—but in writing—filling out a Commitment to Giving Form that will give our Finance Team and the Council some basic income figures to base our mission planning for the coming year.

And wouldn't it be great if every member of our congregation made a commitment to our mission by also making a commitment to giving?

What kind of new beginnings could we envision then?

One way to begin to strengthen our commitment to God is through gratitude, to make giving thanks our way of life.

So, let's start at the end of the gospel lesson for today.

Your faith has made you well, Jesus says to the one man, the only one of ten, who returned to say thank you.

The man demonstrated his faith with his gratitude.

Jesus' words suggest that there is a close relationship between faith and gratitude and that there is something life-giving about gratitude.

It turns out that saying “thank you” matters.

That is often understood as the message of this story in Luke's gospel.

It often gets reduced to an object lesson in which the nine other lepers are the examples of what not to do.

But there is more going on here than that.

Because I don't think it is fair to say that the other nine are ungrateful.
We don't know that.
All ten men call out to Jesus, taking care to keep their distance.
And Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest.
And that is what all ten of them do.
They do exactly as Jesus told them to do—
going back to the priest who has the authority
to let them go back to their families and jobs and lives.
And Jesus told them to go.
As they were going, they were healed—
that's probably a good indication that they should follow the rest of
Jesus' instructions and continue going all the way to the priest.
So, no, I don't think it's fair to say that they were not grateful.
We don't know that.
We only know that they didn't express gratitude to Jesus.

But one of them drops back, stops, and turns around.
And as one scholar on this text puts it:
“Something wilder than compliance comes into his mind.
He is a new man, and that calls for a new voice.
He runs back, praising God with a loud voice and falls at the feed of
Jesus, pouring out the gladness of his thanks.”
This time he doesn't have to keep his distance.
This time, he falls at Jesus' feet and his joy cannot be contained.

There is something about the expressing gratitude that deepens our
experience of joy, of faith and hope.

Some of you may remember that my daughter and I began a practice
of texting things we were grateful for each morning—or at least most
every morning.
I highly recommend it. If you don't like texting, then write the things
you are grateful for down and share it with someone.

Sharing what we are grateful for, doubles our thanksgiving—
because my daughter and I are grateful for things, the people, the
experiences of each other.

If gratitude is good for us and it makes us feel good,
then why don't more of us do it more often?
After all if the statistics of the story are true, 90% of us are not
expressing our gratitude.

So what keeps us from expressing gratitude?
Well, sometimes we don't recognize the gifts we have received.
We don't perceive grace when it happens.
We think that the daily blessings of our lives are normal.
Nothing to write home about.
Nothing to give particular thanks for.

Or maybe we think we deserve what we have.
We worked hard for it.
We put in the hours and the sweat and tears.
We studied and practiced and developed our talents.
The only one to thank would be . . . our selves.
(And, yes, I have heard a few people say this very thing.)

Or perhaps we just forget.
Life keeps happening.
We do what is required or pragmatic.
We keep following the instructions on the to-do list.
We are grateful, but we rarely stop to express it.

It's kind of ironic but a recent study found that 90% of Americans think
that gratitude is important but only 52% of women and 44% of men
express their gratitude on a regular basis.
There is a gap between what we say we believe about gratitude
and how we act on it.

Those statistics are a bit higher for religious people with 65% expressing gratitude regularly.

So . . . I think that many of us are probably in that category.

What I have been learning is that feeling gratitude is good, but expressing it has even more power.

Saying thank you out loud to another human being, taking the time to reflect on it, write it down, pay it forward—all of these are part of the discipline of gratitude.

Like so many other disciplines, the more we practice it, the more natural and spontaneous it can become.

Choosing gratitude and expressing it are among the basic foundations of Christian faith.

Just look at the letters of Paul—how often he gives thanks to God for all that Christ has done for him but also gives thanks to God for his partners in the gospel.

Time and time again, Paul urges us to give thanks in all things.

Just as we hear in the Great Thanksgiving Prayer before communion,

It is our duty and our joy that we give thanks at all times and in all places.

Feeling gratitude is good.

But expressing it has even more power.

Giving voice to our thanksgiving helps us to see how God is making all things new

So let us give thanks.

Thanks for the world, for each other, for the grace and love of God in giving us his Son, Jesus Christ, for daily gifts—large and small—

Let us respond to God's love with a gratitude so deep that it makes us whole and well.

Behold, God is making all things new, beginning with you and me and starting from today!

Amen.

