

Natalie W. Bell  
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 Thanksgiving Sunday

*The Power of Gratitude*  
*Psalm 66:1-12, Luke 17:11-19*

*Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;*

<sup>2</sup> *sing the glory of his name;*  
*give to him glorious praise.*

<sup>3</sup> *Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!*

*Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.*

<sup>4</sup> *All the earth worships you;*

*they sing praises to you,*  
*sing praises to your name.” Selah*

<sup>5</sup> *Come and see what God has done:*

*he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.*

<sup>6</sup> *He turned the sea into dry land;*

*they passed through the river on foot.*

*There we rejoiced in him,*

<sup>7</sup> *who rules by his might forever,*

*whose eyes keep watch on the nations—*

*let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah*

<sup>8</sup> *Bless our God, O peoples;*

*let the sound of his praise be heard,*

<sup>9</sup> *who has kept us among the living*

*and has not let our feet slip.*

<sup>10</sup> *For you, O God, have tested us;*

*you have tried us as silver is tried.*

<sup>11</sup> *You brought us into the net;*

*you laid burdens on our backs;*

<sup>12</sup> *you let people ride over our heads;*

*we went through fire and through water;*

*yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.*

Tis the season for *turkey!*

It kind of symbolizes this Thanksgiving holiday,

as we gather around dinner tables with family and friends.

But it's not all smiles and laughter, is it?

Holidays like Thanksgiving are often *a painful reminder* of what we ***DON'T have***.

We'll be sharing a meal with Ed's parents, which is wonderful,

but I'll be missing my family's Thanksgiving dishes,

even if we did have lasagna one year to 'mix it up'!

Our dinner tables can be *beautiful*, but they can also be ***SAD***—

because there are always *empty seats* for those who won't be joining us.

The decorating and cooking can bring us feelings and *love and joy*,

But they can also remind us of *all the relatives*

that strike up uncomfortable conversations

and cause arguments across the table.

***So what can we DO?***

Well, it will sound very cliché, but we can ***GIVE THANKS***.

***We can express our gratitude for what we HAVE,***

instead of focusing on what we don't have.

We can *thank* one another,

and *share* what blessings we have received this year.

***Instead*** of arguing about politics and religion,

we could fill the air with ***thanks and praise for every good gift!***

I was reading an interesting article in Harvard Health online,

and they said that research reveals the one thing that can beat the blues at the

holidays is ***gratitude***.

Gratitude is the most powerful attitude

when it comes to ***improving our health, especially at the holidays***.

It's good for our hearts, our bodies, and our emotional well-being.

Why? They suggest that it connects us to something larger,

which brings more positive emotions, improved health, and improved ability to

handle adversity.

And there's nothing like a holiday season to bring a little adversity, right?

So I think we can use all the help we can get!

The Harvard research ***reveals amazing things about gratitude***.

In one study two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of

California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami,

asked people to write a few sentences at the end of each week.

The first group was to write what they were *grateful* for during the week.  
 The second group wrote down *their irritations* (geez, can you imagine that list?)  
 The third group just wrote about *events* that affected them.

After 10 weeks, the first group of participants,  
 writing about gratitude, were more optimistic,  
 they felt better, they were more likely to exercise,  
 and they had fewer visits to the doctor than the other two groups!

Psychologist Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, from the University of Pennsylvania, did  
 research by asking people to do different *assignments expressing gratitude*.

Some were asked to write and personally *deliver a letter of gratitude* to someone  
 who may not have been properly thanked—  
 And this one act had an enormous increase in happiness scores,  
 greater than any other intervention,  
 with benefits lasting more than a month!

Think about that.

Maybe we should all go out and do that this holiday season—personally thank a  
 person who might need to hear it, with *a letter of gratitude!*

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

These are just a few examples of what we know in our hearts to be true:

Gratitude is *powerful*.

Gratitude is *healing*.

Gratitude is *transformative*—to us, and the people receiving it!

We should be *full of thanksgiving at Thanksgiving*,  
 and all year round, because it literally *CHANGES* our lives!

And thanking one another is something we often *NEGLECT to do*.

So, I encourage you to bring out the *thank you cards* and send some today!

And I encourage you to *share your blessings* around your dinner table!

But there's *ANOTHER kind of gratitude* that is especially powerful.

And that is our gratitude *to God*.

Sadly, this is something we *often neglect*—

because once our prayers are answered,

we tend to *move on* to the next thing we need fixed by God, instead of just dwelling in God's presence to give thanks.

We have so many blessings from God.

There is all of God's *goodness*, God's character, God's awesome nature and saving grace.

There is the *salvation* of our Savior Jesus Christ for us, in his life, death, and resurrection.

There is the power and promise of God's Holy *Word*.

And the power of the *body of Christ, the church*—the love, the fellowship, the community, the acceptance and belonging.

And there's more.

*There is all that God has DONE for us.*

That's what the story of the *10 LEPERS today* is all about.

Ten lepers were healed, but only the one Samaritan leper returned to give thanks and praise to Jesus for healing him!

Now we must remember that leprosy meant being *ostracized*.

In those days you couldn't even approach another person without calling out to them to warn them of your leprosy!

You couldn't touch anyone.

You couldn't worship with others.

And Jesus healed ten lepers.

But only one returned—even though all ten had been completely healed and restored to their families, friends and community!

And to that one, Jesus said, *your FAITH has made you well*.

Your faith---the only faith we know of in the story is what he did *after his healing*.

It wasn't like he showed faith, so that's why Jesus healed him.

Jesus commends him for his faith, as in, *his thanksgiving and GRATITUDE*—that made him well.

What if our gratitude to God,

for all that God has done for us, *could make US well?*

What if it could transform our hearts, lives, holidays, and community of faith?

According to scripture, *it does all of that, and MORE.*

Again and again, we are called by the Psalmist to praise the Lord,  
to praise God's name,  
to give thanks for who God is and what God has done for us.

In the Bible giving thanks is connected to **REMEMBRANCE**.

That's why we have so many Psalms that re-tell the stories of God's deliverance and goodness.

In Psalm 66 today, we heard this common refrain:

*Come and see what God has done, he is awesome in his deeds...*

and then it goes on to recount the story of the Exodus.

The Psalmist writes:

*He turned the sea into dry land...*

Referring to the Red Sea...when Pharaoh was pursuing them as they escaped with Moses, from slavery in Egypt.

In verse 9 it says that

*God has kept us among the living and not let our feet slip...*

and we could recall countless stories of God saving lives,  
like in the wilderness, by feeding them with manna from heaven, and water from the rock.

So, if we were going to *write a Psalm of Thanksgiving*

(which is not a bad idea for your thoughts when you cannot sleep this week!)

What would we say?

How has God helped us? What do we remember about God's goodness?

How has God *helped you—PERSONALLY?*

Do you have a *story of healing* like the one we hear today?

Do you have a *story of God's provision* like the manna and water?

I was making a list this week of *amazing things God has done in MY life.*

And It's long—so I'll mention just a few.

God has enabled me to *forgive* someone who deeply hurt me,  
and now share life and love with them.

God brought me to my husband *Ed*, just over 10 years ago.

God brought us to *Matawan* from Tulsa.

God gave me 14 extra years with my *Father*  
after his life-altering heart attack and stroke.

God helped my *daughter* through horrible trials.

God gave me a *spiritual director* almost 30 years ago,  
that I still have the honor of meeting with each month.  
God helps me each and every week *prepare worship and sermons*, even on those  
weeks when I feel like I have nothing to say or no energy to say it.

What about *YOU*?  
*How has God helped you?*

And what about *FPC Matawan*?

God has blessed this church with *over 300 years* of history,  
and kept it going after *three fires!*

God has gifted FPC with the *Presbyterian Nursery school* where dozens of  
families have entered the fellowship of this church.

God has gifted this church with *countless musicians and people who love to share  
their many talents in worship.*

God has given us a *dozen active ministry Commissions*, super active *Deacons*, and  
a thriving *Food Pantry ministry*—all to reach out beyond this church.

With blessings like these, we could offer praise and thanks to God  
*for years on end!*

Psalm 116:12-13 asks this question:

*How can I repay the Lord for all God's goodness to me?*

And the answer:

*I will call upon the name of the Lord.*

*Praise the Lord!*

So the question before us this Thanksgiving is:

*Who is our God, and What has God done for us?*

What are our answered prayers, our blessings,  
the times that God has saved and changed our lives?

And how can we *give thanks for that?*

When we give thanks and praise,

When we show gratitude---our lives are literally *CHANGED*.

We start to see *even the hard times* of life, from a different perspective.

Psalm 66 is honest about hard times—that people have walked through fire and  
water, been beat down, overwhelmed...

But in the end... *you, O God, have brought us out to a spacious place.*

I read something beautiful this week in the Upper Room online,  
 About how thanksgiving *changes our perspective on suffering*:  
 M. Thomas Thangaraj wrote:

*A thankful heart lifts us up into the skies,  
 so that our suffering moments look TINY.*

Isn't that great?

A thankful heart lifting us, so that our *suffering looks tiny*.

I love that.

We've all *walked through water and fire---this year, maybe this week*.

But we've also seen the hand of God at work in our lives.

And our God is a good and gracious God,

Working good for us, even through all the hard times.

We *always have a reason* to give thanks.

We can always find reason for gratitude.

The theologian Karl Barth once said that  
 the *basic human response to God*, is *gratitude*.

What if that was our weekly, daily, hourly response to God—gratitude?

We know it's possible.

So, how will *YOU give thanks and praise*?

How will you demonstrate your gratitude to God?

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel*

Our God is so good—and worthy of our praise.

Our lives are blessed, because God is with us, even in the hard times.

We can *choose to give thanks*---and find the *power of gratitude*.

For that gratitude, all God's people can say together,

Amen.