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Joy Together: Thankfulness
Colossians 3:12-17

*Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[f] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, **clothe yourselves with love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ^[g] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And **be thankful**. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[h] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and **with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.**^[i] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks to God the Father through him.***

Lynne Baab, the author of our Bible study book, Joy Together, writes about her journey into thankfulness.

She recalls how she and her husband would pray together at night,
And they would list all the things they needed help with—
The stress of teenagers, a frustrating job, an uncertain call to ministry.
And their prayers—instead of bringing peace and calm—
brought them sadness and frustration.
Because they needed help with so many different things!
Prayer became almost depressing instead of uplifting.

So they started an experiment.

They would begin every time of prayer with thankfulness—
with gratitude to God for the various gifts
that they noticed around them each day and week.

It was not easy.

At first, they could only think of the obvious blessings—
like food on the table and health for their family.

***But then they kept at it,
always seeking to thank God for the gifts of the day.***

A year went by, and another year of saying thanks,

And she writes “*our prayers of thankfulness blossomed even though my husband’s work situation became worse, our teenagers baffled us more than ever, and I experienced no resolution of my job questions. We were amazed by how many things we could notice for which we wanted to thank God: friends, extended family, our neighborhood, bursting flowers in spring, colorful leaves in fall. We saw answers to prayer more readily. We were able to identify small miracles every day....like avoiding an accident or remembering to pay a bill... “*

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 20-22.

This practice of thankfulness changed their lives.

Literally.

They started to notice more and more of God’s gifts—everywhere.

***I wonder what would happen in OUR lives,
if we started ALL prayers with thanksgiving?***

Maybe that’s something you already do---

If not, imagine what it could do in your life!

What if prayers of thanksgiving help us see God everywhere?

What if prayers of thanksgiving help us pay attention, and look for blessings?

This is the idea of sharing God-Sightings in Pathways ---

We want to notice what God is doing,

And give thanks for it!

All the wonderful little gifts and miracles that happen every day!

Think for a minute about a few blessings of TODAY---

What would it mean for you to thank God for them,

Before asking for help?

After Lynne and her husband started this practice of thankfulness,

She noticed how many prayers at her church,

And with her friends,

were focused not on thankfulness, but on ***NEEDS ONLY.***

Just intercession and supplication—asking God for help.

And she realized that many people ***ONLY give thanks to God, before MEALS!***

And sometimes we do not even do that!

Have you ever heard the acronym *ACTS for prayer*?

A—for Adoration

C—for confession

T—for thanksgiving

S—for supplication, or intercessory prayers

It's an acronym to remind us of the different types of prayer.

Baab noticed that we do a lot of ADORATION in worship—
through our music and our liturgy, and our celebration of communion.
And most churches include prayers of *CONFESSION*,
And prayers of the people, for *SUPPLICATION*.

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 26.

But we sometimes have a *DEFICIT in the area of thankfulness—*
of giving thanks to God, not just generally, but *specifically*.

Is that true for you?

How often do we start our prayers by thanking God for what has happened—
in a particular hour, day or week?

It's kind of like we all suffer from "blessing amnesia".

We see God's good gifts,
and then we immediately forget what God has done for us!
Ever found that to be true?

You get a amazing miracle, an unexpected blessing,
A surprise call or card, a bonus, a safe passage while traveling,
Help with your kids or spouse, support as you care for parents....

We experience these miracles and blessings,
and we immediately forget these gifts!

We tend to think: *"What has God done for me, lately?"*

We are not alone.

"Blessing amnesia" has been a problem, since the beginning of time!

All throughout the Old Testament, the prophets,
especially Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea,
are constantly reminding the people of God's saving work!

They call out God's people for forgetting the saving work of God!

In **Isaiah 51:13** the Lord says *You have forgotten the Lord, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth.*

In **Isaiah 17:10** the Lord says: *For you have forgotten God your Savior and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;*

In **Jeremiah 18:15** it says *but my people have forgotten me....*

And in **Hosea 13:6** the Lord says *When I fed^[c] them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me.*

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 24.

Does any of that sound familiar—to US?

Do we experience God's creation, or salvation, or help, and immediately forget?

How forgetful are WE?

How often do we forget what amazing things God has done?

I am certainly guilty of this----

In a mere day after a huge blessing,

I can find myself crying to God that things are bad,

I need help, and everything is a mess!

But.....What about the day before, that was so jam-packed with blessing and miracles?

Or what about the fact that I woke up today?

I'm breathing, I'm talking, I'm standing?

Oh, and the sun came out!

The Jewish people have ways of combating this kind of amnesia.

Jewish **festivals** are all about **remembering** the saving work of God.

The Passover—is about remembering the Exodus from Egypt their salvation from slavery, their journey through the Red Sea and into a promised land!

Purim—is a festival that is about remembering the courage of Queen Esther and how she worked to save her Jewish people from genocide!

One way we work to combat amnesia in the Christian tradition is in communion.

In the Lord's Supper we remember the goodness and gifts of God, specifically our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Another thing we do is use *liturgy in worship*.

When I write or choose prayers and liturgy for our worship,

I use the words of Scripture as inspiration,

I work to include *adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication*.

I try to reflect the context and faith of the people in this congregation,

so that what we are saying and hearing is meaningful, inspiring, and relevant.

Another way we combat blessing amnesia is through stories.

We all learn from stories.

The best sermons and the best worship includes story!

Whether it is a God-sighting moment, a minute for mission,

or a simple testimony about faith.

Stories are powerful.

We need stories of God's goodness.

Stories help us *flex our thankfulness muscles*,

they make us more aware and attentive to God's work all around us.

So, I wonder, how could we pray more by starting with thanksgiving?

Can ALL prayer include thanksgiving?

Could ALL requests be offered as thanksgiving?

There are reasons we resist giving thanks---

Sometimes we don't acknowledge the gifts of God,

because then we have to acknowledge our *utter dependence* upon God!

When we thank God, we are saying we need God!

Lynne Baab even suggests that our society might suffer

from alienation and isolation, because we are reluctant to give thanks!

Why?

Well, if we hold back our gratitude, *we tend to lose* relationships!

Lynne Baab, *Joy Together*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2012, Pg. 35.

Everyone wants to be acknowledged and appreciated, right?

Giving thanks to and for others is a powerful way to connect,

And deepen any relationship!

Try it this week—*tell someone in your life why you appreciate them!*

Another reason we avoid giving thanks

Is our own pain and suffering.

The trials we face do not make us automatically thankful.

Ann Voskamp has written one of the most beautiful books I've ever read.

It's a New York Times Bestseller from 2010, called:

One Thousand Gifts.

Put simply, it is a book about Ann's life, her family, and how she ***sees God's gifts in everything***, down to the soap bubbles in a sink. But it is not just happy-go-luck, or Pollyanna words of wisdom.

Instead, it begins as a story of the way loss marks our lives.

The way one death, can change us, forever.

Voskamp recalls the day her precious baby sister was run over by a truck in their driveway.

That tragic accident changed her family, and her, forever.

It seemed to take away all sense of God's goodness and grace.

And then she faced her own cancer diagnosis.

And all the questions and pain of that journey.

Not to mention the pain of everyday life—

like a child needing surgery, or bills needing to be paid.

So in her longing for goodness, and grace,

she starts to look for the gifts of God in ordinary, everyday life.

And she finds them.

Big and small, obvious and hidden.

It's a beautiful reminder that no matter what we face, there are gifts of God all around us.

The truth is, just like joy and sorrow often happen together in our lives,

So does thankfulness and pain.

Sometimes suffering ***makes us more grateful*** for the gifts that we DO have.

More aware of the blessings, right in the midst of our pain.

[There's a ***powerful hymn of gratitude, written by Pastor Martin Rinkart.***

That we usually sing at Thanksgiving. It's called: *Now Thank We All Our God.*

What we don't always acknowledge is the story behind that hymn of thanksgiving.

The famous hymn was written by a German Lutheran Pastor who served during the 30 years war, and lived during the plague of 1637.

During that plague he did over 100 funerals a week, ***including for his own wife.***

Yet he continued to worship, he continued to see God at work,

he continued to give thanks to God for blessings.
 When the city was taken over and given an unjust tax,
 he protested with a prayer vigil, and they withdrew the tax.
 Even in the worst of life, Martin believed in giving thanks to God.]

Do we believe in thanking God, no matter what our circumstance?

Presbyterian author Anne Lamott wrote a book called:

Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers,

She writes about her gratitude for the crazy little miracles in life...she writes:

*“I’ve seen grace manifest itself as **spiritual WD-40**....*

*And I’ve witnessed the **intervention of goofy angels**, the poor short-straw angels who seem to draw me.*

*I’ve seen many **people survive unsurvivable losses**, and seen them experience happiness again. How is this possible?*

***Love flowed to them** from their closest people, and from their community, surrounded them, sat with them, held them, fed them, swept their floors. Time passed. In most cases, their pain evolved slowly into help for others.....”*

Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Penguin: NY, 2012. Pg. 22-3.

When have you experienced gratitude, during a difficult season of life?

When have **you felt thanks—right in the midst of suffering?**

Maybe you are suffering now---

Is it possible to still experience thanksgiving?

I meet with a spiritual director each month,

for guidance in my spiritual life and practices.

She suggests books, and activities,

listens to my concerns, and then we pray together.

One thing I do before each session is journal,

and the first column is about all the **praises** in my life—

a list of blessings,

and the second column is the **things that I need help with.**

This practice has helped me to be more concrete with my thanksgiving, because I see my blessings in that journal—

they are in writing—right next to all the things I’m struggling with.

Could that help all of us in some way?

This week---let's ask ourselves: When and where do we give thanks to God?

And how can we offer thanks more frequently?

What are the obstacles to this, and how can we overcome that?

And what are the benefits of gratitude in our lives?

The truth is, there is always some reason to give thanks to God.

That is the Good News today.

And for the gift of thankfulness, all God's people can say together, Amen.