

The Heart of Worship

3/4 in Series

Act 3: Thanksgiving

Colossians 2:6-7; Psalm 100 (Responsive Reading)

02 20 2011

Scripture Lesson: Colossians 2:6-7

Blessings of Thanksgiving

A glance at the bulletin, newsletter, or website quickly reveals the wide variety of **activities** available at our church. No one could possibly do everything at Sam Jones. However, we always encourage everyone to become involved in at least three vital areas of our life together: worship, service, and small groups.

One of THE premier opportunities in our church family is the **Wednesday night** dinners and programs. This has become a signature ministry in the congregation and community. There are not many Methodist churches that regularly have over 350 people midweek. It's a great time of food, fellowship, and discipleship.

On a typical Wednesday night, we try to quiet down the rowdy crowd about 5:45 for announcements. This is followed by a **blessing of thanksgiving** for the meal. During my early years of ministry here, one of the pastors normally said the blessing. When we moved into the Family Life Center, we started singing *The Doxology* together.

Then a few years ago—without any forethought or plan—I happened to ask some of the **children to say the blessing**. I had no clue what I had started. This quickly caught on, and soon I was mobbed each Wednesday by children BEGGING for the privilege to give God thanks. It got to a point last year where I created a schedule that was booked for months ahead of time. Isn't God good?

It's funny, though—I've yet to be approached by a single teenager or adult who begged for the honor of praying before hundreds of people. In fact, I suspect most folk would run screaming out the side door!

When do we lose the intuitive desire and enthusiasm to give God thanks? This is one of those times when the young people could serve as our teachers. Jesus said that we must become like children to enter into God's kingdom. Perhaps we begin with the simple words, "**Thank you.**"

Overflowing with Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is a vital part of personal devotion and public worship. It is essential to Christian discipleship. An attitude of gratitude nurtures faith; an attitude of ingratitude causes faith to wither and die.

The apostle **Paul** encouraged Christian disciples to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving. All but one his letters in the New Testament began with a section of thanksgiving. Only the letter to the Galatians omitted Paul's typical prayer of thanks; and this was because the apostle was quite angry with the errant congregation.

Our Scripture lesson today captures the heart of Paul's teaching about gratitude:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thanksgiving. (Colossians 2:6-7)

Hear again that final phrase: "**overflowing with thanksgiving.**" I have preached dozens of sermons on the topic of thanksgiving; however, I had never noticed this **water imagery** before. Last week the phrase jumped out at me. We are called to OVERFLOW with thanksgiving and praise.

In my imagination, I see a tiered water **fountain** with the smallest basin at the top. Progressively larger tiers are layered underneath. Water fills the top tier to the brim and then it overflows to the next level. In turn, the next basin fills to capacity and spills over into the next level.

So it is with thanksgiving in the Christian life. Even a small act of thanksgiving can have a big effect. As we cultivate an attitude of gratitude, it spills over in our lives. Soon joy and praise fill our hearts, overflowing into every aspect of life.

Have you ever tried to carry a **bowl** that was filled to the brim with liquid? It's all but impossible to do so without some of the contents sloshing out. The same thing occurs in people who are overflowing with thanksgiving—it floods the world around them.

In his paraphrase of Colossians 2:7, Eugene Peterson wrote: "*School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.*" (*The Message*)

We all know people who practice this spiritual art—they have discovered the secret of thanksgiving. And when you're around them, they just make you smile. Their testimony of gratitude reminds us of God's many blessings.

We are also challenged to ask the question: Am I filled with thanksgiving or complaining? Do I cultivate an attitude of gratitude or ingratitude? Are my words filled with gratefulness or grumbling? What is overflowing out of my life?

Act 3: Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is a vital part of individual discipleship; and it is also an essential aspect of corporate worship. Today we are continuing our worship series entitled ***The Heart of Worship***. We are both examining and experiencing how to worship God in spirit and truth. During the series, we are using the acronym of **ACTS** as an outline for the sermons. **ACTS** stands for: **Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.**

Act 1 of worship is **Adoration**. Adoration is praising God for who God is. "*The chief purpose of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.*" (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*) We glorify God in worship through song, silence, prayer, fellowship, word, and sacrament.

Act 2 of worship is **Confession**. When we come into the presence of God's holiness, our own sinfulness is all too evident. The Holy Spirit convicts and convicts us of sin, calling us to confession and repentance. "*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9)

Act 3 of worship is **Thanksgiving**—and it’s not even November! Thanksgiving is not a day or a season in the church—it is a daily spiritual discipline. Thanksgiving encompasses three movements of faith:

- 1) Recognize the gift
- 2) Recognize the Giver
- 3) Give thanks

Colossians 2:7 is applicable both for individual faith and public worship—we are called to be “*overflowing with Thanksgiving.*” The heart of worship is a joyful place where God’s people are overwhelmed with grace upon grace.

This is a lesson that we have to learn over and over again. **Joylessness** is a common sin at church. And it’s a sin easily tolerated in worship.

Let me pick on our denomination for a moment—there are times that I fear Methodists have become far too respectable and proper for our own good. It wouldn’t hurt for us to occasionally let go and let God! Maybe we need to echo the petition of the pastor who prayed, “*Lord, let something happen that is not printed in the bulletin!*”

I’ve lived, worked and played with you for almost eleven years now. I have attended a number of athletic events where many of you were present. Professional, college, high school, middle school, youth and children. Football, baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, and wrestling. I have seen you wear school colors, sport car tags, attend away games, and even have temporary tattoos of your team on your children’s faces.

Picture yourself at a game or match—the final moments with only a thin margin between victory and defeat. See your face, feel the emotion, hear the volume. Then compare and contrast THAT moment to THIS moment of worship!

C. S. Lewis said that joy is “*the serious business of heaven.*” Even in the most somber and sacred of worship services, there is an undercurrent of thanksgiving and praise. We gather today to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose again so that we might enjoy life, abundant life, and everlasting life. If that doesn’t put a smile on your face, then I don’t know what will!

I love the prayer of Teresa Avilla, the founder of the Carmelite Nuns, who said: “*From silly devotions and from sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us!*”

Do you remember the children’s song “*If you’re happy and you know it?*” Good—stand up and let’s join in singing it together!

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!
If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!
If you’re happy and you know it, then your hands will surely show it.
If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!

If you’re happy and you know it, stomp your feet!
If you’re happy and you know it, stomp your feet!
If you’re happy and you know it, then your feet will surely show it.
If you’re happy and you know it, stomp your feet!

*If you're happy and you know it, shout AMEN!
 If you're happy and you know it, shout AMEN!
 If you're happy and you know it, then your voice will surely show it.
 If you're happy and you know it, shout AMEN!*

Do you feel a little silly? GOOD! Get in touch with your inner child! We need to be fools for Christ. Frederick Buechner wrote about worship:

A Quaker Meeting, a Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service at First Presbyterian, a Holy Roller Happening—unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful! (Wishful Thinking, p. 98)

The Power of Thanksgiving

We are called to overflow with thanksgiving in our individual lives and corporate worship. When we allow a spirit of gratitude to brim to the spilling in our lives, something amazing occurs. The act of thanksgiving is a powerful discipline that affects our relationship with self, others, and God.

In the mid-1990s, I was serving at First UMC of West Point. One Sunday I preached on the topic thanksgiving and actually gave the congregation a homework assignment. I asked them to think of someone in their lives who had touched them in a special way. Then I asked them to write that person a **thank you note**.

Let it be known that preachers DO occasionally practice what they preach—or at least try to! ☺ So the next week I wrote a thank you note to Bill Edwards. During seminary, I worked with Bill at Kennesaw United Methodist Church. Bill hired me the summer I graduated from college as the Assistant Minister, Youth Director, and Other Duties as Assigned Pastor!

Bill and his wife, Liz, all but adopted me into their family. I learned a great deal about ministry under his tutelage, and the three years we spent together were formative in my ministry. I expressed all of this in the note I sent him.

The next week Bill called to express his appreciation for the note. Then he invited me to lead the stewardship campaign that fall where he now served at First United Methodist Church of Decatur. This was quite an honor for a young pastor, and I still recall preaching in the sanctuary on Consecration Sunday. In many ways, this event helped Bill and me renew our friendship.

Some of you know the rest of the story. Several years later Bill Edwards was assigned to serve here at Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church. When he retired in 2000, he was very instrumental behind the scenes in encouraging my appointment to this congregation. And eleven years later, here we are.

I could not prove that I became the pastor of Sam Jones because of a simple thank you note; but I'm convinced in my heart that God used it to set larger events into motion. The simple act of saying "thank you" is power-filled and opens our lives to Christ's grander purpose and design.

So you now know your **homework assignment** this week: go home and write a thank you note to someone special in your life. I think you will be amazed at the impact it makes on you and others.

God's Response

Here's a final thought about thanksgiving. There's an old joke that asks the question, "What does God say when God sneezes?" I would ask a similar question, "What does God say when we say 'Thank you?'"

Every southern child knows that the proper response to "thank you" is "you're welcome." However, there are other possible, proper responses.

I am a frequent visitor at the local **Chick Fil A** in town. My body has a minimum weekly requirement of a chicken sandwich, waffle fries, and an Ice Dream cup. The restaurant franchise prides itself on customer service and satisfaction.

Whenever I tell a clerk "thank you," they don't respond with "you're welcome," "no problem," "glad to help," or "come back and see us." Instead, they have been trained to answer, "**My pleasure.**"

I LOVE that response. The phrase transcends any business transaction or personal conversation. The person is expressing the pleasure they have taken not only in my business but also in my thankfulness.

Our heavenly Father loves us as God's children. And it is God's delight to meet and exceed our every need. On those occasions when we do pause to say "thank you," perhaps our Lord responds with the words, "My pleasure."

Prayer of Thanksgiving

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