

“Flipping the Script: 90% Gratitude Expected!”

*28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; II Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 9, 2016, 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 23, dedicated to the memory of Bernice C. Dixon, mother of Larry Dixon, Charlie Marie Brown born to Anthony and Maria Brown on October 3rd, Roberta Huntley who died of pancreatic cancer on October 8th, to Robert Sitler, my father-in-law, who I never met because pancreatic cancer claimed his life on his 45th birthday and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In 2008, Lissa Wade gave me a book entitled, “The Last Lecture,” by Randy Pausch. Dr. Pausch was a Professor of Computer Science, Human-Computer Interaction, and Design at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA and a best-selling author. When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer

and had only a few months to live, he gave one last lecture and then spent his remaining months with his family. He died in July 2008.

His last lecture was not filled with new insights into the interaction between humans and computers. It was filled with a lifetime of insights he had gained living 48 years on the planet as a human being. It was the final testimony of a man who knew quite well his end was in sight. I highly recommend you watch you the YouTube video of it, show it to your children and grandchildren. It is powerful and true. In a world now filled with garbage as top news, Dr. Pausch gives us a gift of clarity and seemingly prophetic truths. Please listen to only 25 of the best thoughts in the last lecture.

- *“If I could only give three words of advice, they would be, **“tell the truth.”** If I got three more words, I'd add: **“All the time.”**”*
- *“The questions are always more important than the answers.”*
- *“A good apology is like antibiotic; a bad apology is like rubbing salt in the wound.”*
- *“People are more important than things.”*

- *“You can always change your plan, but only if you have one.”*
- *“Are you a Tigger or an Eeyore? You just have to decide whether you are Tigger or an Eeyore. You have to be clear where you stand on the Tigger/Eeyore debate.*
- *“Never lose the child-like wonder. It's just too important. It's what drives us.”*
- *“No job is beneath you. You ought to be thrilled you got a job in the mailroom - And when you get there, here's what you do: Be really great at sorting mail.”*
- *“There's a lot of talk these days about giving children self-esteem. It's not something you can give; it's something they have to build. Coach Graham (Assistant Football Coach at CM) worked in a no-coddling zone. Self-esteem? He knew there was really only one way to teach kids how to develop it: You give them something they can't do, they work hard until they find they can do it, and you just keep repeating the process.”*

- *“The person who failed often knows how to avoid future failures. The person who knows only success can be more oblivious to all the pitfalls.”*
- *“All my adult life I've felt drawn to ask long-married couples how they were able to stay together. All of them said the same thing: “We worked hard at it.”*
- *“I know you're smart. But everyone here is smart. Smart isn't enough. The kind of people I want on my research team are those who will help everyone feel happy to be here.”*
- *“Give yourself permission to dream. Fuel your kids' dreams too. Once in a while, that might even mean letting them stay up past their bedtimes.”*
- *“One thing that makes it possible to be an optimist is if you have a contingency plan for when all hell breaks loose.”*
- *“Find the best in everybody. Just keep waiting no matter how long it takes. No one is all evil. Everybody has a good side, just keep waiting, it will come out.”*
- *“When we're connected to others, we become better people.”*

- *“We can’t pick the hand of cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.”*
- *“When it comes to men who are romantically interested in you, it’s really simple. Just ignore everything they say and only pay attention to what they do.”*
- *“Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted. And experience is often the most valuable thing you have to offer.”*
- *“No matter how bad things are, you can always make things worse.”*
- *“It's not about how to achieve your dreams, it's about how to lead your life, ... If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself, the dreams will come to you.”*
- *“Time is all you have and you may find one day that you have less than you think.”*
- *“Complaining does not work as a strategy. We all have finite time and energy. Any time we spend whining is*

unlikely to help us achieve our goals. And it won't make us happier.”

- *“A lot of people want a shortcut. I find the best shortcut is the long way, which is basically two words: work hard.”*
- *“Never give up.”*

When a person is faced with death and can still express himself or herself, they boil down the meaning of life to the things that really matter. That is the gift we receive in the words of Randy Pausch.

It is also the gift we receive in the words of Jesus found today in Luke 17. It the story of the healing the ten lepers. Having turned his eyes, his feet, his entire body and mindset to his end in Jerusalem, Jesus is showing us what really matters. He can see the city walls as he heals the lepers. He knows his days are numbered. Soon he will be executed on trumped-up charges (that expression will never be the same) for the crime of being God's son. As he heals ten, only one returns to say “thank you.” Interestingly, it is the Samaritan, the stranger who returns to say “thank you.” Jesus responds, “Your faith has made you well.” A better translation is, “Your faith has saved you.”

Jesus heals ten. But, he saves only one. Salvation comes to the one with a heart of gratitude. Salvation comes to the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee, the immigrant - call him what you will – but salvation is given when gratitude is expressed.

We have two stories here. One is a healing story. The second is a salvation story. Are you following this? Healing is great. The end of leprosy is a gift from God granted to ten who come in need of healing. But, salvation is an even greater gift from God that comes to those who are thankful. Gratitude on the lips of a healed stranger saves him. His gratitude grants him a place of true joy in the Gospel of Luke and the Kingdom of God!

How about you? Are you one of ten or are you among the nine of ten? In the face of healing, have you returned to say “**thank you**”? Whether in thanks for a teacher, a principal, a doctor, a counselor, a friend, a pastor – have you returned to say “**thank you?**”

When I was at Yale Divinity School, I was blessed ever so briefly by the presence of Henri Nouwen. You know him for his writings in spirituality. Many of our Advent and Lenten **booklets through the years have contained Henri’s writings.** I knew him as the man who taught me to say thank you to those who cook and wash dishes. While I am not as grateful as my teacher, I try to remember. But, he would go into the kitchen

after every meal and say “Thank you to each person.” His was a life of salvation. I yearn to be like Henri. It is my heartfelt prayer. Thank you Henri!

Are you the one who is grateful every day for everything or are you one of the nine who is hanging on to stuff and carrying a load of anger, resentments, and bitterness around with you? Are you the one who confesses or one of one nine who points fingers? Are you the one who smiles and laughs in the face of trouble or one of nine who grimaces and groans in the face of challenge? Are you Tigger or are you Eeyore?

We live in a world where duty has become privilege and gratitude has been too often been buried with the depression era “**Greatest Generation**” who have all but passed before us now. We still have the guests, the visitors, the strangers among us who show us how a heart of gratitude guides our worship and service. It is often the stranger who sings heartily the hymns that we members groan to whisper. It is the stranger who expresses gratitude for blessings not noticed, who listens attentively to sermons we yawn at and to which we say, “**Heard it before...boring again.**” The stranger gets excited about our old Bible and shows up at Laundry Love early with detergent in hand. It is the stranger who smiles and says, “**Thank you.**”

During the sermon series on Mental Illness, it was the strangers who came among us who dropped notes of thanks, sent emails of gratitude and left phone messages about how

much the series meant to them. On one Sunday, a woman who actively has battles paranoid schizophrenia all of her adult life and is afraid of church and all the judgment she has faced and at 55 years old returned to church, sat in the front row (Where the Deacons sit) and touched her heart, and blew me a kiss at the benediction and with a smile on her face mouthed the words, “Thank you.” The next day she was in OSU’s psyche unit trying to figure out her next steps in her lifelong battle.

I received this note from a woman I do not know. She wrote:

Dear Rev. Ahrens,

I can't thank you enough for your insightful 5-part sermon series on mental health. As a NAMI family-to-family teacher and a mother of a son with mental illness, it meant the world to me that you chose to be a stigma buster! I'm so pleased that you took the NAMI class and became an educated advocate for those who struggle with these terrible illnesses. In contrast at the last church I attended, the minister actually proclaimed that God could strike down a man who failed to repent of his sins with a mental illness! Imagine my horror and disappointment as I sat next to my son that morning and later tried to make sense of the sermon with him. Again, thank you!! Sincerely....

As I sat reading this note, I felt two things – deep gratitude for the joy and thanks expressed and deep anger that yet another pastor had abused yet another person in the pews

in their struggle to be human. But gratitude grabbed me. I add to admit without that pastor, I never would have met this gracious woman.

Today, let us flip the script. Today, let us be 90% - or more – grateful for all that God has placed in our lives, all that God has put in our path and has challenged us with. Today, may 9 of 10 say thank you! In fact, 10 of 10 would be even better. To our parents – whether living or dead – “Thank you.” To our children, no matter how they have pressed us to the edge, “thank you.” To our brothers and sisters of every faith and no faith at all – “Thank you.” And to our God in prayers before meals – thank you. In prayers at the break of dawn “thank you.” At the closing of the day, “thank you.” For toil and trouble, sweat and hard work, hardship and peril, “thank you.” For joyful moments and laughter and love – “thank you.”

In closing I return, with thanksgiving to Randy Pausch and his “Last Lecture.” *“Too many people go through life complaining about their problems. I've always believed that if you took one tenth the energy you put into complaining and applied it to solving the problem, you'd be surprised by how well things can work out.”*

And finally he says, *“Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things humans can do for each other.”* So, in the spirit of Randy and the Samaritan— let us be thankful! And in the spirit of Jesus, may we be truly saved by gratitude.

My sisters and brothers of faith - Flip the script. From now on, 90% gratitude is expected. It is the way to salvation. It is the way of Jesus. And if you like it - try 100% gratitude on for size. Try Tigger! You will not be disappointed. Thank you.

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