

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens,  
Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United  
Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 19, 2008,  
Pentecost 23, dedicated with thanksgiving to the staff and  
lay leadership of First Congregational Church, and always  
to the glory of God!*

## **“Gratitude”**

### **Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22**

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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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Gratitude. It doesn't seem like a hard word to grasp. But "gratitude" has a way of sneaking up on us and calling us to change. Gratitude comes upon us unexpectedly and calls us to be different. It is a word that never stands alone. It is always growing in response to something internal, or perhaps something external, that has changed our perspective and opened our eyes. It is often coupled with "attitude," as in, "An attitude of gratitude."

Webster's Dictionary defines gratitude as, **"A feeling of thankful appreciation for favors or benefits received;**

**warm, appreciative response to kindness; thankfulness.”**

Gratitude is a simple gift. We know it when we feel its presence.

But too often it is an elusive gift. We walk away from gratitude because we are too busy to acknowledge it; too blinded by bitterness or anger to see it or name it; or too preoccupied with what is wrong in our lives and in our world to know it is a breath away. Gratitude is a gift that opens us to more gifts. It is the greatest of virtues and the parent of all others and it is born in a heart of thanksgiving.

This past week, I drove past a little Episcopalian church in New Haven, Conn., where I started in the ministry. Church of the Ascension is a bilingual congregation – Spanish and English – in which I was one of the only monolingual worshipers. As part of my field work, the church sponsored a Thursday afterschool program for children in the neighborhood. Most of them kids were first generation on the mainland from Puerto Rico. We had snacks, games, homework time and relationship-building time. We started with five children.

We ended each session in a circle by holding hands saying what we were thankful for. The first day, when I asked, “What are you thankful for today?”, there was silence in the room. When I prompted the group, one child after another said, “Nothing.” I closed with, “I am thankful to be alive. I am thankful to be in this circle with you. I am thankful to be holding Emilio and Rosanna’s hands. I am thankful for air and sun and rain. I am thankful for food and shelter and kindness. I am thankful for God and God’s loving me.” Emilio said, “I didn’t know we could be thankful for all

of that.”

On our last day, after eight months of weekly meetings, we had 50 children in the circle. Emilio started, “I am thankful to be alive . . . I am thankful that God gave me happiness.” Thirty minutes later, our thanksgiving came to an end with a closing prayer. Thirty minutes after that, we had ended with hugs and farewells. Our attitude had changed. We had become a beloved community of gratitude. We had learned to live together. We came to know that there was no duty more urgent than returning thanks.

We would be wise to add gratitude as a ninth beatitude: ***"Blessed are those that can give without remembering and receive without forgetting."***

Rabbi Harold Kushner has it right when he says, "If you concentrate on finding whatever is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul." Johannes A. Gaertner has spoken of gratitude this way: "To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch heaven."

In Paul's epistle today, we are introduced to the beloved community of Thessalonica. Here was a church with convictions of steel and hearts of gold. Writing with Silas and Timothy in mind, Paul wrote this in the opening of his letter, "Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you are in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith; your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Lord, Jesus Christ . . . It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much, but also has put his

hand on you for something special” (I Thessalonians 1:2-4).

Paul goes on to say how the Thessalonians changed him for the better. I love this! I love it because it blows away our traditional view of Paul, the evangelist. We often see him as taking faith to people and placing faith in their hearts. But, in fact, Paul was changed by the spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude in the people of Thessalonica. Their gentleness and joy, their ceaseless hearts of praise and thanksgiving changed Paul and Silas for the better. They made the tough and seasoned apostle vulnerable to a kindness and conversion of the heart. People of grace and gratitude do that to us, don't they?

These are hard times in which we are living. Our 401Ks are devalued, our stocks have dropped like rocks in the river, our pensions are shaky (if we have pensions) and the outlook for jobs and job security is up in the air. We have candidates for elected office talking about terrorists from yesteryear instead of white-collar economic bomb-makers blowing holes in our economy on Wall Street today. We have commercial after commercial run on radio and TV blasting the integrity of opponents rather than offering hope for today and tomorrow. We have predatory lenders trying to overturn state laws that give a chance to people who are down and out in our times. We have gambling casinos trying to get a foothold in Ohio through efforts to change the state constitution for their corporate greedy purposes. As Joe Hallett has written in a column in today's *Columbus Dispatch*, "Please make it stop . . . Please November 4<sup>th</sup>, hurry up and get here."

These are hard times when any one of us in this room could lose faith, hope and even love for our neighbors and

God in the midst of troubles that afflict us and assault us. But we have a secret weapon in the arsenal of response to greed and need. We have gratitude. We only need to invest in our attitude of gratitude and we will begin to see a change in our outlook and our forecast in times such as these.

I am reminded of a story of twin brothers. One was always sunny, happy, and thankful. He saw the best in everything. The other was always unhappy, complaining, and ungrateful. He saw the worst in everything. On their 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, the boys' parents decided to experiment with their sons to see if they could affect their attitudes based on the gifts they gave them. For the negative twin, they filled a room with the newest and best computer. For the positive child, they filled a room with horse manure.

When the negative child entered his room, he complained that they hadn't given him a new game system and a new Wii, plus this computer looked stupid. When the positive child entered the stinky, piled-high room of manure, he leapt into the pile and began to laugh and smile and toss the manure heavenward. He turned to his parents and said, "Thank you so much mom and dad. This is wonderful! Wherever there is this much manure, there must be a horse nearby!"

We are certainly living in times piled high with manure. Perhaps we can find the horse nearby!

We need a God who is with us in these times. We need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. We need a God who is with us when things go wrong, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem lost. That is when we need our God

most of all. Gratitude will carry us from wounded hearts of hurt and deliver us into the arms of God. From there, God will take over, for God will deliver us to hope from the hurt.

I don't believe we need the sheltering wings of the angels when things go smoothly. But I do believe we need God's light when we are stumbling around in the dark. And we need to constantly say "thank you" to the Holy One who we meet as we are getting tripped up in the darkness of our days.

Albert Schweitzer, doctor, pastor, theologian, and musician gave us this insight into a life of gratitude: "To educate yourself for the feeling of gratitude means to take nothing for granted, but to always seek out and value the kind that will stand behind the action. Nothing that is done for you is a matter of course. Everything originates in a will for the good, which is directed at you. Train yourself never to put off the word or action for the expression of gratitude."

Our Savior Jesus Christ comes to us as one who sorts things out with a heart of love and gratitude. He meets us in our thanklessness and instills us with laughter, love and thanks. He brings his light to us and our darkness is distilled. Today, may we remember to say "thank you." As we do, we will experience nothing less than heaven on earth. Amen.

