

“Endlessly Grateful”

**Psalm 84:1-7, Sirach 35:12-17, II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18,
Luke 18:9-14**

**Part seven of the sermon series,
“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, October 23, 2022, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, dedicated to Charlise Jane Shimeall-Evans on her baptismal day and to my granddaughter, Hazel Elizabeth Sitler Stadie, born October 22nd and to my daughter, her mother, Sarah Ruth Sitler Stadie and her husband Nathan Stadie and always to the glory of God!

“Endlessly Grateful”

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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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We all know Jesus was the consummate storyteller. He was a playwright of sorts. In today’s Gospel in Luke 18, he invites his listeners into the theatre to imagine a two-person drama that fleshes out his teaching about prayer and gratitude. He dedicates his mini-play to “those who are convinced of their own righteousness and despise everyone else.”

He describes his two characters with such color that they all but beg to be mimed. Jesus’ wonderfully satiric portrayal contrasts an unassailably egoistic performer with a starkly humble petitioner.

As the audience, he invites us (as always) to see ourselves in both characters.

The first is a Pharisee, a member of a seriously religious group that strove to obey all of God's 613 laws. This guy might as well have introduced himself with a haughty, "*My name is Narcissus.*" According to Jesus' story, Archie (a nickname he hated!) took up his prayer position and prayed to himself.

In case that statement didn't explain it all, Jesus quoted Archie's monologue. We can almost picture Archie there, posing as if for a mirror and itemizing his litany of personal qualities – in which he was perfect in every way. While listening to his recital of virtue is that all his activity centers on keeping himself squeakily spotless and that each of his statements begins with "I." But blameless as he wanted to appear, he exposed himself as the exact opposite.

He claims not to be greedy, but he glances at others only to demean them while maintaining his position as the center of his concern. He claims to be honest, yet he was not even honest enough with himself to be aware of his own weaknesses. He thanks God that he isn't an adulterer, but in covenant terms, his self-worship expresses the very idolatry that the ancient Hebrew prophets traditionally labeled as Israel's prostitution.

He tells us he observes the letter of the laws of fasting and tithing. But he is totally missing the point that fasting orients us to help us put our own needs aside and tithing leads us to care for others. Archie offers the world nothing by which he can be positively remembered.

Jesus describes Archie's counterpart as a tax man. This fellow, let's call him Zack, assigns himself a place on the outer edge of the sanctuary. There in the shadows he bows his head to pray. His simple prayer is nothing more than an admission of his sins and his plea for God to have mercy on him. It seems Zack doesn't care what he looks like as he prays. He comes before God simply, as himself, begging for mercy and ready to accept it. His plea demonstrates his desire to move beyond selfishness. He is honest about who he is, all his weaknesses, all his shortcomings and he looks to God to save him from himself.

What would Narcissistic Archie say if someone points out that Humble Zack actually fulfilled what he had claimed in his phony prayer to God?

Jesus' parable explains God's preferential option for the humble and the truly thankful. Only those who know their need for God will pray in a way that God can answer. Truthfully, God loves us all, but God likes us best when we are humble enough to admit that we need help and when we are open enough to receive what God wants to give.

The story of Archie and Zack is a great lesson on humility and thankfulness. It is also a great teaching on living and giving with gratitude – and a call to every person to be endlessly grateful.

Over the past two Sundays, we have heard Greg Halbe and Chris Glaros stand before us and open themselves up to us. Like Zack in this story, they have spoken from the heart. Each has woven strands together in our church's tapestry of love and grace. They have shared why they came to First Church, what kept them coming back, why they love our family of faith and what they love about this place we call our spiritual home.

“Thank you” Greg and Chris (and thank you Marty Worth who wrote a First Reflection on Friday, October 14) for sharing and opening yourselves up to us. You are stewards of the gifts God has given you and we are grateful for the ways in which you live and give with gratitude.

Like our witnessing stewards and like Zack in Jesus’ story today, each one of us is called to be humble as a Steward of the gifts God has given us. We are each called to live and give with gratitude and humility. The truth is Stewardship is all about giving to God. It is about humbly turning over total control of our lives over to God. Stewardship is about prayerful and a thoughtful attitude of sharing with others which translates into the action of sharing. It is about joyfully sharing our time, talents, and financial resources.

And Stewardship is about All things in Life. It is about living lovingly and thoughtfully in relation to the earth, all creatures and all people. Stewardship is about conserving water, recycling paper and aluminum, preserving wetlands and rain forests, rivers and water tables, exercising, eating right, managing stress, nurturing our relationships and marriages, raising happy and healthy children, caring for aging parents, as well as caring for the poor and oppressed in our city, state, nation and world AND “Yes” Stewardship is about sharing and living into the life-giving message of faith in Jesus Christ. All of these – all of life lived well for God is important to stewardship.

Just like life itself, stewardship is never an accident. We don’t stumble into stewardship by showing up at church and suddenly become generous givers of our time, talent and financial resources. We also don’t care for ourselves, God’s creation or other people by accident.

People who live and give with gratitude are endlessly grateful. They give with gratitude and not with an attitude of judgment or focus on themselves and their gift. They give with grace-filled extravagant generosity.

Let's call this **Gratitude Giving**. Gratitude giving is worshipful, systematic, proportional, planned, sacrificial and joyful. Gratitude giving reflects the entire being of the giver, demonstrates their total involvement in the community, the vibrancy of their faith and exceptional commitment and trust of God. Gratitude giving is a witness to God's Gospel of Love, given purposefully over time, given out of faith in God and given in trust and confidence as a way to glorify God and praise the Great Steward of the Universe and the Great Steward of each one of our Lives.

And Remember – all this giving is done **cheerfully** – just as all of life should be lived cheerfully! It is true! Our Generous God really does create generous and joyful and thankful people!

Cheerful is good!

Years ago, Harvey Cox, professor at Harvard Divinity School, told the story of a conversation with a Buddhist monk at an Interfaith Conference. The monk asked Harvey, "Why is it that Christians always seem to frown when speaking about Jesus? You furrow your brows. You look so serious. You argue with each other about things that don't really matter. Don't you realize you have the best Savior, Spiritual Light and Guide of any faith? He was joyful. He was cheerful. He was filled with a Spirit of Love. So why don't his followers look joyful, cheerful and loving? Lighten up. Soak in your Savior's love and light and share it with others."

The monk was right. We follow a Joyful, Loving, Cheerful Savior. Let's reflect that in all we say and do as well.

Let's be like the tax collector (Zack). Let's Be Humble. Let's Be Prayerful. Let's Be Thoughtful. Let's Be Grateful. Let's Be Generous. And may each of our lives be a testimony of faith lived out with joyful gratitude. May we reflect all the blessings we have received from God in our lives by living with unending gratefulness. Amen.