

SERMON TITLE: "Give Thanks!"
SERMON TEXT: Psalm 107:1-9, 33-43
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 19, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I've always been the kind of person who wants to ask, "Why?" I've never liked it when someone tells me to do something without an explanation. It's not that I'm contrary. I usually try to get along and do whatever is expected of me. But, if I can understand *why* I should do something, it makes doing it so much easier.

At Thanksgiving time, we're reminded that we should give thanks, but little explanation is usually given to us about *why* we should do that. Of course, we know that expressing gratitude is polite and usually makes other people feel good. When we're in a happy mood and have a desire to please others, good manners and kindness might be reasons enough to get us saying, "Thank you." But, just in case some troubles are causing us to feel less grateful this year, then we might want to look at giving thanks in a different way. Not to say that we should be crass and self-centered, but it might help us to understand some ways in which being thankful helps *us*. So, whether you're already feeling the Thanksgiving spirit or you need some encouragement, I invite you to consider Psalm 107 with me this morning. Let's see what it says about *why* we should give thanks.

1—RECOGNIZE & FEEL HOW BLESSED WE ARE

Psalm 107 indicates that one benefit of giving thanks is that doing so helps us recognize and feel how blessed we are. As the Jewish people of long ago sang this ancient song of thanksgiving, they were reminded how much God had looked after them and cared for their basic needs. As they lifted their voices in this act of thanksgiving, they felt the joyful blessings of God. The same thing happens today when we sing a song, tell a friend, make a list, read some verses of scripture, or say a prayer of gratitude.

We too are reminded of how blessed we are. We recognize this in our minds, and we feel it in our emotions.

So, what kind of blessings are we talking about? Psalm 107 gives us some ideas. In verses four through seven, the psalm reminds us that, after the Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt and wandered in the desert wastelands, God led them to a place where they could settle and make a home.

Most of us appreciate this blessing of home. A home can be a house that keeps us safe, comfortable, and warm. A home can also be a neighborhood, a city, or a state that feels familiar, pleasant, and right. I read an article on Friday that listed the 50 states in order of how happy the people felt living there. Minnesota was number one. And Utah was number two. Not bad, huh? The factors that scored really high for Utah were “work environment” and “community and environment.”¹ Apparently, we Utahans are happy with our jobs, and we like the towns where we live. I’d say that’s something to be thankful for, wouldn’t you?

Besides the blessing of a home, Psalm 107, verse 9, reminded the Hebrews that God blessed them with food—satisfying the thirsty and filling the hungry with good things. Verse 20 says that God blessed the Hebrews by healing the people. In verse 29, the Hebrews were reminded that God stilled the storms, calming the distress of those who were sailing at sea. Verses 37 and 38 extol God for providing fruitful harvests and maintaining their animal herds.

Today we know of God’s work in our lives in similar ways. God feeds us when we’re hungry, heals us when we’re sick, and protects us from danger. Of course, we can always name exceptions. We wonder why our loved ones lose a job or suffer from Alzheimer’s. We know of people who are involved in tragic accidents, and the news tells us week after week of more horrific violence. But we also know the pervasive truth that people are living longer and healthier lives all the time, and that accidental deaths happen much less frequently than in times past. When we give thanks for those abundant life blessings, we both recognize them in our brains and feel them in our hearts.

2—FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE IMPROVES LIFE

A second benefit of giving thanks is that such a focus on the positive improves our life. This is true no matter how bad our situation is. If we can think positively, options open up, solutions appear, and our life will get better.

That's not to say that everything is rosy. No doubt, there were times when the Hebrew people suffered terribly. Psalm 107 refers to lots of troubled times when the Israelites cried out to God. Our Psalter reading from the hymnal skipped verses 10-32. Those verses contain these words and phrases: *sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in iron chains, rebelled, spurned, bowed down, hard labor, fell down, distress, bars of iron, iniquities, affliction, loathed, gates of death, destruction, calamity, reeled and staggered like drunkards, and wit's end.*² There's no denying that things go wrong.

But that's exactly why the psalm writer said we should give thanks to God. Just because bad stuff really does happen doesn't mean we should let it consume us and destroy our hope. As we see in verse six and many other verses of this psalm, when the Hebrew people cried out for help, God heard them and delivered them from their distress. God met their needs in wonderful and loving ways. And, no matter how much trouble *we're* in, no matter how bad *we* feel, God can help *us*, too. When we give thanks, we remember this positive truth, and it enables us to reach out for the help we need. It enables us to improve our life.

My United Methodist clergy health insurance comes with a pedometer that I wear every day. When I upload my steps onto the website at night, it asks me some questions. Did I make time for a workout? Did I eat healthy food? How many hours of sleep did I get the night before? A new question in the past week has been, "Did you write something today in your gratitude journal?" The idea is that, if we name something every day for which we're grateful, we will be healthier. And that's not just happy-emotions healthier. That's even physically healthier. That's my-insurance-company-cares-because-I'll-

cost-them-less-money-healthier. When we focus on the positive thoughts of gratitude, our whole life actually improves.

3—REMIND US THAT WE AREN'T ALONE

A third reason to give thanks is to remind ourselves that we aren't alone. In the New Revised Standard Version, Psalm 107 contains the words *Lord, God, him, his, or the Most High* 43 times. In the New International Version, those God words appear 50 times. What that says to me is that the songwriter had a clear sense of God's presence. In their successes and failings, in their good times and their bad times, God was with them.

When life is going well, it's easy to get a big head and think that our success or happiness is all because we've single-handedly pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps. And when life isn't going so well, it's very easy to feel overwhelmed, scared, depressed, and alone. That's especially true if there's been a divorce, a death in the family, or the loss of some other important relationship. Giving thanks to God keeps us from becoming conceited, arrogant, and selfish during the good times. And giving thanks to God keeps us from feeling alone during the difficult times.

I've gotten hooked on the NBC television program "This Is Us." Maybe you've been watching it too. It's a story about a family that had triplets, two of whom were born to the parents and one whom was adopted. The story line goes back and forth in time, filling in bits of history while developing the present events. In the most recent episode, Kevin—the triplet who had the most athletic ability and charisma—was now struggling terribly with an addiction to opioids and alcohol. At one point in his despair, he dropped to his knees outside in someone's yard, and he cried out, "I just need somebody to help me. Somebody, please help me." Kevin, the star athlete and celebrity actor who was always popular and surrounded by people who adored him, felt all alone. And it wasn't until he sought connection with someone beyond himself that he was able to head to his brother's house to get the support he needed. Kevin needed to know that he wasn't alone.

That TV episode didn't talk about giving thanks. It was much more about the despair we get into when we think we have to do everything perfectly all by ourselves. Fortunately, though, we don't have to do everything perfectly all by ourselves. We have God and other people to help us out. And giving thanks is a way to remind ourselves about that. When we express gratitude, we express it *to* someone or feel it *for* someone, and that reminds us that we aren't alone.

CONCLUSION

I started this sermon by saying that we usually think we should be grateful as a way to please other people, as a way to be polite. And that's true. We *should* lift the spirits of other people by appreciating who they are and what they do for us. But gratitude isn't just altruistic, for *other* people's benefit. Being thankful is also extremely helpful to *ourselves*.

I found an internet article written by a guy who said he wasn't even religious, and still, he found 31 self-benefits to being grateful. His list, based on a number of different research studies, included increased self-esteem, being more resilient, having a healthier marriage, achieving more goals at work, having better friendships, sleeping better, and living longer.³ Those all seem like pretty good reasons to be thankful.

And, of course, we who do believe in God and express ourselves in religious ways know how easy it is to share our gratitude with God in song and prayer. So, in this season of thanksgiving, go ahead—not just because I'm telling you to do it, or because Psalm 107 is telling you to do it, or even because God wants to hear it. If need be, just do it for yourself. For your very own well-being, give thanks!

¹ <https://wallethub.com/edu/happiest-states/6959>

²NRSV.

³ <http://happierhuman.com/benefits-of-gratitude/> and <http://happierhuman.com/the-science-of-gratitude/>