

SERMON TITLE: "Gratitude: A Balance of Grit & Grace"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 15, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Have you noticed how produce has changed in the grocery stores over the past few years?

Instead of buying a bag of whole carrots that we have to peel and cut up into carrot sticks, now we buy those packages of baby carrots. Instead of buying a whole watermelon, a whole cantaloupe, and a whole pineapple, we might just buy a fruit tray already cut up in bite-sized pieces. Instead of buying a head of lettuce, now we buy a bag of salad mix—pre-cut and pre-washed, completely ready to eat. How different that is from the fresh vegetables some of us enjoyed from the First UMC Community Garden this past summer and early fall. While the garden volunteers cleaned up and bagged the produce to an amazing and labor-intensive extent, the very last vegetables of the fall reminded me where our food really comes from. Those freshly-dug carrots were covered in dirt and needed quite a scrubbing to get them clean.

The way we get our meat has changed too. As we're looking toward Thanksgiving, I doubt any of you are planning to pluck your own bird. If you're a ham lover, you might even purchase one that is already fully cooked and only needs to be heated up. For our non-holiday meals, rarely do we even buy a whole chicken that has to be cut into parts. Instead, we buy a Styrofoam tray of breasts or thighs, pork chops, steaks, ground beef, or stew meat, all easily-ready to drop into the skillet or pot. How different that is from when I was a kid, when my dad would go out hunting and bring home a whole deer. Pulling it out of the back of his pickup, the animal would be covered in fur and blood and no small amount of mud—as was my dad when he came home with it.

The vegetables right out of the church garden and that deer with dirt on it would be a lot like what the Pilgrims had at their legendary Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. Without any indoor or outdoor plumbing to clean up their food, no doubt their feast of gratitude included some grit as well as grace.

1—GRATITUDE WITH A BIT OF GRIT

Gratitude as a balance of grit and grace is exactly what the Apostle Paul was writing about in 2 Corinthians 4:7-15. We see this immediately in verse seven, where Paul writes, “But we have this treasure in clay jars.” The treasure the Apostle refers to is Christ, the image of God, who shines in the darkness and gives us the knowledge of the glory of God. That treasure which we possess for ourselves and share with others is a wonderful blessing, worthy of thanksgiving. But it isn’t found in the glistening chandelier of a vaulted ceiling or in one of those bright colorful strings of Christmas lights that we will soon be hanging from our eaves.

The light and glory of God has come to us through the human flesh of Jesus, the early flesh of the first disciples, the imprisoned and wounded flesh of the Apostle Paul, and the weak and mortal flesh of hundreds and hundreds of generations of believers since then. The Christian treasure of God’s heavenly glory comes to us in a very earthly way. The six chemical elements of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus make up 99% of our bodies. The bedrock and soil we stand upon includes more iron, silicon, and magnesium than our bodies. But we human beings, like all the other living beings on this planet, are essentially created from the dust of the earth, and to the dust of the earth we will return. We are little more than clay jars, made from the dirt beneath our feet.

And yet, this grit and grime is exactly where our gratitude begins. Even in these fragile, mortal, and sometimes-painful bodies—we can be grateful, as Paul was, that God has given us life on this earth. Sure, sometimes our existence on this planet is beset by natural disasters and harsh challenges like COVID-19 and the hurricanes pounding Central America. The losses are huge and will have repercussions for generations. Nevertheless, in spite of these traumas and others that we human beings face around the world—somehow and so far, the human population on this third rock from the sun has managed to survive and continue. These clay jars that we occupy have served us pretty well. This existence of dust, dirt, and mud is how God gives us life. Thus, our gratitude begins with this reality of grit.

2—GRATITUDE INCLUDES A BIT OF GRACE

Of course, there's more to the story. As Christian people, our gratitude also comes from grace. At best, we human beings not only survive in the flesh but also thrive in the spirit. If we were only clay jars, our life wouldn't be very interesting or hopeful. We would labor and suffer with little meaning or purpose. We would live, reproduce, and die without any sense of progress or expectation of better days ahead. Our clay jars would end up as nothing more than broken shards. But, with the gospel of Christ crucified *and risen*, we are provided the hope that holds us together. With the faith story of sin and suffering *redeemed*, we are given the grace that evokes great gratitude.

As Paul writes in verses eight and nine, with the spirit of Christ filling our clay jars, we can be “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” When we carry in our clay jars the body of Christ crucified, “the [resurrected] life of Jesus is made visible in our mortal flesh.” In verse 14, Paul assures us that “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us . . . into his presence.”

Even though we are fragile clay jars, God fills us with the treasure of life. Gods’ life-giving power enlightens and transforms us. This good news of Christian faith is a message and gift of grace for which we and others can offer our gratitude and thanksgiving.

3—GRATITUDE IS A BALANCE OF GRIT & GRACE

We might wonder, though, why God doesn't just skip the clay-jars part of our existence and go straight to the creation of Christ's spirit of life in us. With the availability of amazing and wondrous grace, why do we need any grit at all? Why do we need these weak, limited, and sinful human bodies? Why do we have to spend any time thinking about and enduring the misfortunes and tribulations of life? As individuals, families, and societies, why can't we just have happy thoughts and positive experiences? Why can't we just skim over the troubled waters and go straight to heavenly perfection? Wouldn't that serve God's purposes better? If everything went perfectly in our lives, wouldn't we be more thankful and

therefore more convincing witnesses for the gospel? Wouldn't more people believe in Jesus Christ that way?

Ironically, says Paul, grace can't spread without grit. For thanksgiving to increase, there needs to be a balance of grit and grace. In verse seven, Paul explains this by saying, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and doesn't come from us." If we were all grace and no grit, no one would believe that God's mercy is a real resource that is available to *anyone*. They'd think we were born lucky or that we were exceptions to the rule. No one would believe that redemption and salvation are possible for *everyone*.

Do you remember the 1985 movie *The Breakfast Club*? It was about five high school students who were serving their school detentions on a Saturday morning. Each of the teenagers represented a stereotype. One was an athletic jock. One was a popular rich girl. One was a drug-using stoner. One was a straight-A nerd. And one was a kind of gothic girl who mostly avoided notice.

At the beginning of the detention period, the students didn't know anything about each other except their stereotypes. In a sense, they despised each other, but mostly because they assumed that the other students' lives were trouble free. How can you have any stress if you're the star athlete, if your daddy buys you diamond earrings, or if you get straight As? If you're behaving like a criminal or hiding behind your hair and dark makeup, surely that's just because you choose not to be burdened by social norms, and not because anything is really wrong. But, over the course of that long morning together without much else to do, each student revealed to their peers how difficult and gritty their life really was. Each one of them was a clay jar, dealing with some pretty earthy stuff. And, yet, somehow, in the sharing of that very personal and painful information, the five students all gained some perspective, some empathy, and possibly some healing grace.

Obviously, *The Breakfast Club* is a movie and not real life. And rarely does just one Saturday morning change anyone's direction very much. But the point of the movie was that sometimes grace does enter into our grit. When we let down our barriers, sometimes God finds a way to shine light into

and out of our clay jars, allowing divine glory to transform us and spread to others. And, to use the words of Paul in verse 15—as this grit-balanced-with-grace “extends to more and more people,” it “increases thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

CONCLUSION

Before you dive into your Thanksgiving feast in a couple weeks, I hope you will take some time to thank God for the grit. Thank God for the dirt of the earth that grows our fruits and vegetables. Thank God for the farmworkers who labor under the hot sun in dire conditions, with grit in their teeth as they plant, weed, and harvest our food. Thank God for those men and women who raise animals, put up with the stench of feedlots, and suffer the hardships of slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants. Don’t just hurry to the nice and easy parts of life. Thank God for the bodies of clay—old and young, strong and weak, healthy and sick, pleasant and annoying—that gather (or, this year, maybe aren’t able to gather) around your Thanksgiving table.

And then, in addition to that grit, be sure to thank God for the gift of grace which helps us to be so much more than the sum of our earthly parts. Thank God that we can look beyond our limitations and afflictions, knowing that the God who raised Jesus from the dead also has the power to raise us up to newness of life every day. Through hope, mercy, forgiveness, inspiration, and love, God changes our lives for the better and uses us—even in our weakness—to prove to others that such salvation is possible. In this month of Thanksgiving, let’s express our gratitude with a balance of grit and grace.