

SERMON TITLE: "Seek Ye First: Thanks"
SERMON TEXT: Romans 1:1-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 31, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Wasn't it great to have our Craft Fair on Friday and Saturday?! Having the hubbub and voices in the Narthex and nearby rooms felt very nice. Even though we were wearing masks, it felt like a comforting return to life as it used to be before the COVID pandemic. Last year, we weren't able to have a Craft Fair, and—even as the United Methodist Women were making plans earlier this year—they weren't sure we would be able to do it this fall. But, thanks to God and COVID vaccines, the Craft Fair turned out to be a viable event.

I'm so grateful that booster shots are now available for people 65 and over and for people who have extra health problems. And the expectation that children's vaccinations will soon be possible gives us another reason to rejoice and give thanks. Social distancing and mask wearing continue to be important, of course. But, as COVID specialists around the country have repeatedly said, "One strategy continues to be more effective than any other in beating back the pandemic: 'Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine.'" As a Johns Hopkins epidemiologist said it, "'Our top goal has to be . . . shots in arms [first].'"¹

When we get our priorities straight and put first things first, everything else becomes easier to manage. As our "Seek Ye First" stewardship theme has emphasized over these past weeks, that's especially true when we put God first. As we read from Jesus' words in Matthew 6, when we seek God first, we're able to worry less about our material needs. As we read from Moses' words in Deuteronomy 26, when we seek God first, by giving God our first fruits, then we're able to live well in the land. As we read last Sunday from the letter of First John, when we seek God first, we're reminded that God first loved us and that God calls us to love one another. And, as we just read from Romans 1, when we seek

God first, we're able to give thanks. Let's take some minutes this morning to unpack that last thought. Let's see what Paul meant and how we too might seek God first by giving thanks.

1—THANKS TO GOD

The key message in this text is what the Apostle Paul wrote in verse eight. That verse begins, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ." Seeking God first is deeply rooted in our gratitude to God and to God's Son Jesus. Paul indicates several reasons why we might feel this appreciation.

In verse one Paul writes about his sense of being called and set apart by God as an apostle. Even if we don't identify with Paul's apostolic-level sense of calling, we know that every person has a purpose given to them by God. This purpose from God gives our lives meaning and value. This calling for which we are uniquely talented, skilled, and positioned gives us a sense of happiness. In God's eyes, our lives matter. Yes, sometimes we might grumble about having too much to do. Sometimes we might wonder why other people don't step up and do their part. Why does so much responsibility fall on our shoulders? Why does God ask so much of us? But who doesn't want to feel needed and important? God's purpose and call are reasons for rejoicing and for giving thanks.

In verse four, Paul writes about the resurrection of Jesus, which declared him to be the Son of God. Raising Jesus in power and holiness, God demonstrated the power of resurrection to which we all can look forward in hope. When we seek God first, we are assured of a blessed future with God after we die. For this positive anticipation, we give thanks to God.

In verse seven, Paul refers to his readers as "God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." Implied there are the truths that God loves *us* too, and desires to make us holy. God doesn't just tolerate us. God doesn't just accept that we are sinners. God loves us enough to transform our hearts and minds through the power of the Holy Spirit. Day after day, year after year, God's divine power is shaping us into more-saintly human beings. God's patient, loving, and persistent power to improve and perfect us is a great reason to give thanks to God.

If we need any more reasons to give thanks to God, Paul offers another one in verses 16 and 17. There Paul describes the gospel as "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Paul writes that it isn't our religious heritage or birthright that saves us. Salvation through Jesus is equal opportunity. Everyone has spiritual access through faith.

In Lutheran and other Protestant churches, October 31st is traditionally celebrated as Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther made it known that he disagreed with many positions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. He publically posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Ninety-five theses covered a lot of issues, but central for Martin Luther's theology was the belief that all persons have direct access to the mercy of God. We don't have overcome a whole bunch of difficult barriers, and we don't have to worry and fret and lay awake at night, fearing that we aren't good enough or that we aren't doing enough. When we're seeking God first, we can have grace and peace through Jesus. For our salvation through faith, we can give thanks to God.

2—THANKS TO GOD FOR ALL OF YOU

Of course, seeking God first isn't limited to thanking God for all the wonderful things *God* does for us. As Paul wrote in verse eight, he was also thanking God through Jesus Christ "for all of you." Paul's letter was addressed to the Christian community in Rome. They were a small minority in that city. Most of their neighbors were polytheists who worshiped the Roman gods. Some other neighbors were Jewish. But some of those Gentiles and Jews had come to believe in Jesus Christ, and they had formed a congregation of believers. They were a small-but-mighty group of Christians, and their faith had become apparent, not only in their own city, but also "throughout the world."

Just as Paul was expressing his gratitude to God for the Christians in Rome, so I also want to express gratitude to God for you. Here in Utah, it's easy for us United Methodists to feel like a very small and insignificant minority. But our congregation has been a part of the Ogden metropolis for 151

years, and we've been known near and far for our Christian faith and positive community engagement.

Our mission projects of charity and mercy are admired by many. Think about this with me:

- For 13 years, our church held annual 5K runs and chili cook-offs to provide support to the Veterans Nursing Home, and, this year, the proceeds from our pumpkin sales will go to the Veterans Home.
- Over the past decade, our church garden and beekeeping ministries have improved earth care and food ministries here in Ogden and in Africa, where we have supported agricultural missionary Mozart Adevu.
- For decades, our United Methodist Women have supported Catholic Community Services, the Lantern House, the YCC domestic violence shelter, Family Counseling Services, and the Ogden Rescue Mission with proceeds from their annual rummage sales and craft fairs. In fact, when Glenn Lanham, the new director of Family Counseling Services, started his job, one of the first things he did was call our church. He wanted to thank our United Methodist Women for what he considered to be a truly amazing record of support.

Those are just a fraction of all the ministries our church has done in faith and service. And that's why I give thanks to God for all of you. And I'm sure each of you gives thanks for one another, as well. It's like Paul wrote in verses 11 and 12. When we share our prayers and spiritual gifts with one another, we're strengthened and "mutually encouraged by each other's faith." When we seek God first, we get to be a part of a faith community that does a lot of good, and that's a great reason to give thanks.

CONCLUSION

Gratitude is a natural component of seeking God first. The power of God's mercy and salvation cause us to rejoice in thanksgiving. The Christian community encourages us with their love, prayers, and acts of service and mission. How could we not give thanks for such support of our faith?

Thanks can be expressed in many ways. We can say thanks to God in prayer. We can sing our thanks in hymns. We can write our gratitude in thank you cards to one another. We can offer thanks by "paying it forward" with our acts of kindness and good deeds. We also can express our thanks by supporting our church financially through our tithes and offerings. When we make the ministries of the church possible, the gospel is proclaimed inside the sanctuary through Facebook Live, and around the world.

In a sense, we give thanks for what has already happened in the past, and in the faith of what is yet to come. In the words of a hymn, we “give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises; for knowing whatever tomorrow may bring, [God’s] Word is our promise—always, forever; we rest in God’s keeping and live in God’s love.”² When we support the ministries of our church, our collective faith is made visible, and God is glorified. By seeking God first through our pledges for 2022, we’re able to praise and honor God in a way that truly expresses our thanks.

¹ David Leonhardt and Amy Wu, “Almost Like Clockwork,” www.nytimes.com Morning (e-newsletter), 9/1/21. The quotation was actually, “Our top goal has to be first shots in arms.” I modified it for clarity.

²Jane Marshall, 1980, “What Gift Can We Bring,” c. 1982 Hope Publ. Co., verse 3.