

SERMON TITLE: "Be Thankful"
SERMON TEXT: Colossians 3:12-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 21, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I'm really glad the Pilgrims had their Thanksgiving Day feast in Plymouth 400 years ago, in 1621. And I'm really glad that, in 1863, President Lincoln instituted Thanksgiving as a national holiday. I'm glad because Thanksgiving is a really great celebration. We get to cook and eat wonderful food. Most of us get an extra day or two off from work or school. We have a special opportunity to enjoy the company of family and friends—either in person, over the phone, or with video conferencing. And, for some people, Thanksgiving weekend is a great holiday because of all the football games and shopping opportunities. But there's one other feature that makes Thanksgiving so great. Thanksgiving is the one holiday of the year that reminds us that we should be thankful.

Think about it. Christmas Day inspires us to be generous. New Year's Day gives us hope for new beginnings. Valentine's Day reminds us to say, "I love you." Easter teaches us to believe that, no matter how bad our situation becomes, God can always make something good come out of it. Mother's Day and Father's Day honor our parents. Memorial Day helps us to remember those who have died. Fourth of July celebrates the independent birth of our nation. Labor Day recognizes the contributions and rights of workers. Veteran's Day honors those who have served our country in the military. But only Thanksgiving really emphasizes and reminds us how much we need to be thankful.

1—SCRIPTURE TELLS US TO BE THANKFUL

Being thankful is important for several reasons. Maybe the first one is that the Bible gives us this holy wisdom. You might have noticed that our call to worship from Psalm 107 told us to "give thanks to the Lord, for God is good." And, in Colossians 3:15-17, we were told to sing with gratitude in our hearts and to give thanks to God in whatever we do, in word or deed.

Lest we think this advice from scripture comes lightly, we might want to consider that life during biblical times was no picnic. This admonition to be thankful doesn't come from a time or place in which people had it easy. The Jewish people were regularly suffering from war. Enslavement and exile at the hands of foreign powers were part of their Hebrew experience. Drought, pestilence, and famine were constant threats. Death from sickness and disease was expected. Even in New Testament times, the Apostle Paul and many other Christian leaders were imprisoned, tortured, and executed for their faith.

Yes, in 2020 and 2021, we've been living in hard times with the COVID pandemic. We've all been faced with worries, sickness, death, and grief. Hardships have abounded at school, at work, in our church, and in the community. Serious conflicts over differing opinions have added to our collective distress and anxiety. And it's a horrible thing that we're now about to have our second major holiday season with COVID still affecting so much of our lives. But our situation today is certainly no worse than those in biblical times. And so, we are reminded by the scriptural wisdom that has come to us across the centuries and millennia: Gratitude isn't just for the good and easy times of life. In spite of all our difficulties, we still should be thankful.

2—WE'RE NOT ALONE

The biblical advice to be thankful isn't just a command without a good reason, however. This guidance to be thankful is also a reminder that we're not alone in this world. Whether we realize it or not, much of who we are and what we have comes to us from outside of ourselves. We are neither bereft of help nor self-sufficient. A grateful spirit will keep us from feeling hopeless on the one hand and self-centered and arrogant on the other. Being thankful will keep us connected to our community and to God.

Without gratitude it's easy to begin thinking that the world revolves around just our own efforts. There's a story about a woman who asked her farmer husband to say grace before a meal. Her husband, who wasn't a very religious man, replied, "I don't know why you think we should thank the Lord, when **we** tilled the ground, **we** planted the seeds, **we** did the fertilizing, **we** harvested the crops, **we** ground the grain, **we** kneaded the dough, [and] **we** baked the bread."¹

Maybe that farmer ought to realize that **we** did not put the sun in the sky or cause the rain to fall. **We** did not tilt the earth on its axis, so the long days of summer would warm the earth. **We** did not create the first seeds and fertilizer. **We** did not even create our strong backs and smart brains. All those things are the work of God's hands, not ours.

And very often the benefits we receive are the work of other people's hands. There's a story about a man who *was watching his [ninety]-year-old neighbor planting a small peach tree. He inquired of [his neighbor] as follows: "You don't expect to eat peaches from that tree, do you?" The [elderly] man rested on his spade. "No, at my age, I know I won't. But all my life I've enjoyed peaches from trees planted by folks older than me. Planting this tree for the next generation is just my way of saying 'thanks' for all that those people did for me."*²

Paying our thanks forward is a great way to express our gratitude. And so, of course, is telling people directly. As the pandemic stress continues on and on, wouldn't it be great to send a "thank you" card to every healthcare worker that you know? In these years when teachers have been under so much pressure, wouldn't it be great to send a card of appreciation to the teachers you know?

We work, we play, and we live in community with God and neighbor. Together we give and take, so that all our needs are met. Being thankful reminds others and us that we are not alone.

3—GIVES US A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

A third reason we should be thankful is that it gives us a positive outlook on life. A thankful person is a happy person; a grateful person will always find a reason to smile. "Thankfulness leaves no room for discouragement."³

There's an old *legend of a man who found the barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart.* There were all kinds of terrible seeds in that big barn, but the man discovered that seeds of discouragement were by far the most numerous. Curious about this, the man asked Satan, "Why?"

"Because the seeds of discouragement can grow in almost any heart," answered Satan.

“Almost any?” asked the man. “Is there a kind of heart that is resistant?”

When so questioned, Satan reluctantly admitted, “Well, yes. There is one place in which I can never get the seeds of discouragement to grow.”

“And that is . . . ?” pressed the man.

Satan replied sadly, “In the heart of a grateful person.”⁴

We see that same truth in the classic story of Robinson Crusoe, the shipwrecked sailor who was washed up on a lonely island. There by himself, he could easily have succumbed to feelings of depression. But, instead, Robinson Crusoe “drew up in two columns what he called the evil and the good.”

He was cast on a desolate island,	but he was still alive, not drowned . . .
He was apart from human society,	but he was not starving.
He had no clothes,	but he was in a hot climate where he did not need them.
He was without means of defense,	but he saw no wild beasts, as . . . [in] Africa.
He had no one to whom he could speak,	but God had sent the ship so near to the shore that he could get out of it all the things necessary for his basic wants.

So Robinson Crusoe “concluded that there was not any condition in the world so miserable but that one could find something for which to be grateful.”⁵

A spirit of thankfulness will chase the blues away from the worst kind of experiences and make common, everyday situations more interesting. British author G.K. Chesterson wrote that the most important lesson of his life was learning the difference between “taking things for *granted*” and “taking things with *gratitude*.”⁶

A similar lesson was learned by a boy who observed his grandmother bow her head and offer her thanks to God before she ate her meal. “Why did you thank God for your food, Grandma?” the boy asked. “Well, Jimmy,” she replied, “I’ve figured out that it makes everything taste better to be thankful.”⁷ Whether we’re in the worst possible dilemma or just going through the motions of some rather ordinary days, a spirit of thankfulness can put a positive taste in our lives.

CONCLUSION

Yesterday morning, members of the Children’s Ministry Team gathered here at the church to assemble some Advent kits that will be delivered to the homes of families with kids. While we were here, we also unloaded a bunch of Vacation Bible School decorations and supplies from Mitch Boren’s pickup and Brenda Boren’s SUV. The Rocky Railway VBS decorations included a train, a couple railroad crossing signs, and some large animals like Lawrence Elk. Those items will come in very handy next summer when we hold our Vacation Bible School the week of August first.

We had planned to use that particular VBS curriculum back in 2020, and then hoped again that we could do it in 2021. But COVID and other circumstances prevented us from having VBS. Bummer! That was disappointing! But our misfortune turned into a very positive outcome. A couple churches in Salt Lake City did manage to hold their Vacation Bible Schools using that same Rocky Railway curriculum. And they were willing to donate a whole bunch of wonderful decorations and leftover supplies to us. As we unloaded Mitch and Brenda’s vehicles and carried in the items, we kept saying over and over again, “Wow! We’re really blessed.” We’re so thankful for all the money and time that will be saved by the gracious donations from those other churches.

Not everything in life goes how we’d like it to. But there’s almost always something for which we can be thankful.

¹A variation on Frank Lyman, “Finishing in the Top 10%,” *Dynamic Preaching*, Oct-Dec. 1998, p. 13.

²James S. Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Tyndale House Publ: Wheaton, IL, 1998), p. 259.

³⁻⁴V. Norskov Olsen, in *Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 262. Only the parts in italics are actually quoted from the source. The rest is paraphrased.

⁵Don Emmittee, in *Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 258.

⁶Herb Miller and Douglas V. Moore, *300 Seed Thoughts: Illustrative Stories for Speakers* (Net Press: Lubbock, TX, 1986), p. 101.

⁷Adapted from *Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 265.