

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

“An Attitude of Gratitude”

John Wilkinson

November 25, 2018



**Third
Presbyterian
Church**

John Wilkinson

“An Attitude of Gratitude”

November 25, 2018,

Christ the King Sunday

Stewardship Sunday

Joel 2:21–27 and Matthew 6:25–33

Some years ago, when I was a seminary student, I did an 18 month internship between my second and final years at a small urban church in Indianapolis. It was a great, great experience. The church had an extensive neighborhood ministry: tutoring, food, jobs, and a strong community presence. I learned a lot.

One day, I was sitting in my office and the phone rang. It was the local television station. Perhaps you remember a time when TV stations signed off, at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, when 24 hour cable, overnight infomercials, endless reruns of “Law and Order” and pillow commercials were not a thing. TV stations signed off, usually with a playing of the national anthem and a flag waving in a wheat field somewhere.

This station took it one step further. Before the playing of the national anthem, they had a local minister offer a three minute reflection, a kind of mini-sermon. My hunch that the days of TV stations signing off are long gone, and even more so, the practice of mini-sermons offered by local Christian ministers faded away long ago.

Nonetheless, I got the call. Would I prepare five, three-minute reflections, and come down to the station to record them. Sure, I said. It wasn't exactly hard work, but coming up with five ideas, and boiling it down to three minutes and making it palatable for TV presented its own unique challenge. But I did it. I got to the station, and the recording went well enough. I actually kind of forgot I did it except every so often someone told me they saw me on TV. “Why were you up so late?” was my typical reply.

What I remember most about that experience had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with another minister there to record at the same time. I don't

think he prepared in the same way I did, but rather just started talking, and when the clock said 2:45, he started to wind things down. Had I not been 24 years old and incredibly nervous, I might have tried the same thing. Few of these things are memorable, I would imagine, his or mine or anyone's, but I remember one of his distinctly – he said the phrase “attitude of gratitude” about a million times, or if not a million, 5 or 6. “An attitude of gratitude.” I remember it, clearly, all these years later.

He was right, of course. It's a rare Sunday after Thanksgiving that's not also the first Sunday of Advent, and it gives us an opportunity not only to think about this most extraordinary of holidays, but also the impulses behind it. Let us stipulate that we have work to do on our understanding of Thanksgiving in a world of white privilege and historical reality. And let us also stipulate that what the holiday often is, a day for football and eating, both of which I enjoyed, often allows us to miss larger themes. Both stipulated.

But that word, “thanksgiving,” and a national invitation, and at a deeper level, a core bedrock principle of faith. What does it mean to live with an “attitude of gratitude,” and not turn it into a hollow or trivial platitude?

The prophet Joel tells the earth, the animals and all people to rejoice and give thanks to God who provides all that is needed. “You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.” What would that look like for us, to understand God as provider, and not ourselves, or our hard work, or our deserving?

Jesus tells his followers not to worry about what they will eat or drink. If God makes the grass grow and the lilies bloom and gives food for the birds of the air to eat, than what have we to worry about? What would that look like for us to not worry, to trust God, and not ourselves?

We are in a Year of Stories, and happily so, so perhaps a sub-section could be a season of gratitude stories. What would yours be? Smaller, personal ones. Larger, communal ones.

Gratitude is good for us. John Tierney famously published a column in the New York Times which begins with the declaration that Thanksgiving is the most

“psychologically correct holiday.” Feelings of gratitude have “been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, higher long-term satisfaction with life and kinder behavior toward others, including partners.”

But our faith tradition knows that. Rod Rosenblatt writes that “church is the place where we get in touch with divine generosity, and therefore gratitude, on a weekly basis....(there is) no match for gratitude when it comes to reviving the spirits and inspiring works of love. Thank God for that.”

I worry that we have turned gratitude itself into a commodity. Website after website encourages us to keep gratitude journals. Writing things down for which we are thankful seems like a good idea – I try to do it, especially when I am feeling somewhat ungrateful. Yet David Zahl writes that “tips on ‘how to be more grateful’... seem to ignore how so much of the power of gratitude lies in it being a response, something that is by definition not terribly receptive to leverage or exertion.”

And I worry that we misunderstand gratitude. Zahl writes: “Don’t confuse gratitude with indebtedness. Sure, you may feel obliged to return a favor, but that’s not gratitude, at least not the way psychologists define it. Indebtedness is more of a negative feeling and doesn’t yield the same benefits as gratitude, which inclines you to be nice to anyone, not just a benefactor.”

Our mistake, Diana Butler Bass, is in making gratitude “transactional.” It is a response, not a requirement. Bass reminds us that gratitude is not about debt and duty, about reciprocity, but about abundance, and sharing, with no expectation of return.

Sometimes I worry that we underestimate gratitude, or embrace the notion that if we were just more grateful, that bad things won’t have the impact they do. That feels trivial to me. Molly Marshall writes: “Being grateful is a powerful guiding force for managing even the hardest aspects of being human.” I believe that.

In 1936, Connecticut governor Wilbur Cross issued the following Thanksgiving proclamation: “Time out of mind at this turn of the seasons when the hardy oak leaves rustle in the wind and the frost gives a tang to the air and the dusk falls early and the friendly evenings lengthen under the heel of Orion, it has seemed good to our people to join together in praising the Creator and Preserver, who has brought

us by a way that we did not know to the end of another year. In observance of this custom, I appoint Thursday, the twenty-sixth of November, as a day of Public Thanksgiving for the blessings that have been our common lot and have placed our beloved State with the favored regions of earth — for all the creature comforts: the yield of the soil that has fed us and the richer yield from labor of every kind that has sustained our lives — and for all those things, as dear as breath to the body, that quicken man's faith in his manhood, that nourish and strengthen his spirit to do the great work still before him: for the brotherly word and act; for honor held above price; for steadfast courage and zeal in the long, long search after truth; for liberty and for justice freely granted by each to his fellow and so as freely enjoyed; and for the crowning glory and mercy of peace upon our land; — that we may humbly take heart of these blessings as we gather once again with solemn and festive rites to keep our Harvest Home.”

Place yourself within those words. And ask yourself these questions:

- For what are you grateful, little and big? Make a list, but as a response, not a duty.
- Where is gratitude lacking in your life, and how are other forces pushing it away?
- How would a communal sense of gratitude – in our city, in this church, in our world, make a difference, and how can we model that gratitude?
- How can we think about harvest more faithfully?

Let's take a moment in silence, and without coercion or sense of transaction, ponder those things, those moments, those people, for which we are grateful...

Let us conclude with a Thanksgiving prayer by Jesuit priest James Martin: “Thank you, God. I'm grateful, God, for so many things. Now, I know I'm not the most grateful person you know, God, so let me take some time to tell you what I'm thankful for.

I'm grateful, God, for the gift of life. Without you I wouldn't be here. Without you nothing would be here. Without you nothing would be at all.

Most of all, God, I'm grateful for your presence in my life. You're everywhere, and if I remember to pay attention I can see your invitation to meet you in every moment

of the day. I know that it is you who turn my mind to thoughts of gratitude. And when I'm tempted to focus only on the problems and worries and fears, I know that I'm being led away from you.

Now, I'm not always as thankful as I should be, but today I am. Today I will try to be grateful all day, since you are generous all day to me, like you are every day.

Amen."

Third Presbyterian Church
4 Meigs Street
Rochester, NY 14607-2013
www.thirdpresbyterian.or

