

“Thank You, Lord, Thank You!”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday
November 24, 2019

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. ³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. ⁵Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Second Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 8:11-18

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.



Sermon: *Thank You, Lord, Thank You!*

Does God help us find parking spaces? I sometimes wonder about that; have, ever since I was a kid. When we would go places and my mother would find a parking space close to the door, she would always get excited and say “Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you!” As if the very hand of God had reached down and shoved someone else’s car out of the way.

And both my parents did that, actually. Find something in the cupboard that she needed and didn’t think was there? Mom would say “Thank you, Lord, thank you.” Remember an appointment she had forgotten in time to not be late? “Thank you, Lord, Thank you.” Find that someone had left the lights on in the car overnight but the next morning it starts anyway? “Thank you, Lord, thank you.”

Now I don’t fault my parents for giving God credit for good parking spaces, and such. Their faith is deep and has sustained them through many challenges. But it seems to stretch the bounds of believability to think of God in the midst of helping doctors deep into complicated surgeries, and preventing warring nations from destroying one another and guiding people through life-changing decisions taking a break from all that just to intervene so as to save my mother and me an extra 100 feet of walking at the grocery store. But no matter what the gift or how small the blessing, my parents would always say the same thing: “Thank you Lord, thank you.”

And had you asked them, they would have told you that God certainly has more important things to do than open a parking spot at just the right time. But they were grateful for every good thing in their lives. And they always expressed that gratitude to God. Which is consistent with the way the Bible teaches us to live. In the Deuteronomy passage I just read, Moses speaks to the people gathered at Mount Sinai and reminds them of all that God has done for them through the Exodus and all that God will do for them going forward: saving them from bondage in Egypt, leading them through their 40 year wilderness journey, feeding them with manna all the way, and finally delivering them to a land of promise.

Everything that they have and everything that awaits them; the homes in which they will live, the fields which will produce the food they eat, the streams of water that give life, the wealth they will have accumulated; it will all be from God and therefore the people should live so as to express their gratitude to God who has so generously provided for them.

In this season of Thanksgiving, as we have tried to focus on gratitude to God for God's blessings all month and not just for one day, we have learned that living according to God's will; keeping God's laws and loving and serving God by loving and serving God's people are integral parts of living lives of gratitude. But there's something simpler I want to encourage us all to do that will make our lives brighter and better, each day: Be intentional about being thankful. Live every day in an attitude of gratitude.

You see, there's a couple of ways you can go through this life. You can celebrate the things you have or you can complain about the things you don't. Ever stand in your kitchen staring into your refrigerator feeling like there's nothing to eat? Doesn't matter how much food is actually in there, or in your cupboards, "there's nothing to eat." Or how often do you look in your closet and feel dissatisfied because you have nothing to wear? Or sit in front of your TV with the 500 channels and the multiple streaming services and complain that there's nothing to watch? Sometimes the things we don't have carry more weight than the things we do. Sometimes we can get so focused on the deficiencies that we look right past the abundance.

I was watching TV the other day and found *It's A Wonderful Life*,¹ so I stopped and watched it for a while. Most of y'all probably know this movie. It's a Christmas classic. My first thought was that this seems early for a Christmas movie. It's not even Thanksgiving yet. But then I realized that even though it is set around Christmas, *It's A Wonderful Life* is actually a better Thanksgiving movie.

George Bailey, the film's central character, lives in this place where he cannot recognize all of the blessings in his life because of all the struggles and disappointments he has experienced. When he reaches the conclusion that his family would be better off without him, God intervenes and sends an angel named Clarence who shows George what the world would have been like if he'd never been born. It seems to focus on the good George has done. But this movie is really about George's inability to recognize the good he has received.

The movie ends happily with George realizing just how rich with blessing his life is, but George's situation hasn't changed significantly. The debt that sent him into a spiral in the first place is paid off, but the other factors of his life remain essentially the same. He still lives in that same small town. He still doesn't get to explore the world as he has always yearned to do. He's still got Mr. Potter over at the bank trying to shut down his family building and loan. He still can't hear out of one ear.

What changes for George Bailey is not his situation, it is his attitude. He sees the goodness and light that was all around him the whole time. He chooses to celebrate what he *has* instead of mourning what he does not. He chooses to live in an attitude of gratitude.

"Thank you, Lord, thank you."

And it can be as simple as that; as simple as making a decision to be thankful. There are certainly some things I wish were different in my life. I wish Harry wasn't autistic. I wish my children were not as familiar with the pediatric neurology department at Nationwide Children's Hospital as they are. Sometimes just those two things alone can feel overwhelming. Everyone has difficulty in their lives. Acknowledging that difficulty is not wrong. We're not called to pretend our lives are better than they are. We're meant to be honest with ourselves and others. But there is a difference between recognizing where things could be better and letting those deficiencies define us.

No matter how rough things are. No matter how difficult. No matter how much easier life would be if your circumstances were different. There is still much to be thankful for *right now*. And life is simply better when we name those blessings. Gratitude is more energizing; more life affirming than disappointment. But maybe you feel like you don't have much for which to be thankful right now. Maybe you're going to tell me that sometimes life is just devoid of good things. Then I'm going to tell you to open your eyes and look again. Because sometimes we don't recognize what's happening when it's happening right in front of us.

A couple of weeks ago I was walking through the church when I heard the bells ring at half past the hour. Usually on the bottom and top of the hour you get a little version of the Westminster Chime (bing-bong-bing-bong, bing-bong-bing-bong). Except one of the bells was dropping out. It just wasn't ringing. So this time the chime went bing-bong-****-bong, bing-bong-****-bong.

Did anybody else hear that? So I ran into the office and asked Mary Shaffer if she noticed that one of the bells hadn't rung. You know what she said? "I didn't notice." So I went back to my office to get some work done, with every intention listening to the bells when they rang 30 minutes later to see if the skip was a one time thing or if there was something broken. At some point, I looked up from my writing and realized it was well past the top of the hour. I had missed the bells. Never even heard them ring. So I went back down to Mary's office and asked if she noticed this time that the bells had rung correctly. You know what she said? "I didn't notice." How can we be sitting right under these huge bells that are ringing every 30 minutes and not hear them?!? Because we get so involved in what we're doing, that we don't notice a series of loud clanging bells sounding all around us.

God's blessings are like those bells, ringing loud and clear, sending beautiful music into the world, announcing the time, regular as clockwork. And we can get so engrossed in our worries, our problems, the things that cause us trouble; the things that demand our attention right now, that we don't even realize those blessings are floating and fluttering all around us. That's why in my newsletter article this month I asked you all to make your lists. Yes, to celebrate Thanksgiving in a more intentional way, but also to help you see beauty through the clutter; to encourage you to lift your head from your work and listen to the bells.

And if you did, I hope you were made profoundly aware of just how rich and many are the blessings of God. I did. I found that I am thankful for so much. I hope you'll indulge me for just a minute so that I can share my list with you. I am thankful to God for...

1. Mary
2. Will Grey & Harry
3. Nationwide Children's Hospital
4. Mom & Dad
5. Bridgeway Academy where Harry goes to school
6. My career as a minister and Overbrook Church & the PCUSA for providing me the opportunity.
7. Time at the USWNT soccer game with Mary
8. Centennial High School band and Will Grey's connection with them.
9. My home state of South Carolina
10. My sisters
11. Books, movies, and music.
12. Disney Plus
13. A quality furnace and a warm house in cold weather
14. Fried foods in all their glory
15. The life of William M. Gause
16. Lazy Saturdays with Mary, Will Grey, and Harry
17. A free press
18. Teachers that care deeply about my children and work overtime to help them.
19. Chocolate Chip Ice Cream
20. The elders, deacons, and volunteers who serve this church.
21. Breakfast food.
22. Elected officials who govern with integrity and courage
23. Patience and second chances
24. For miracles big and small

Now there are a whole lot more things that could go on that list. Some more profound and some less so. If you match that list against what was happening each day an item was added, you can probably see why I was thankful for that particular thing on that particular day. Some of those days were good and some of those days were

difficult. But every one of those days was touched by God's blessing. And recognizing that fact made the hard things easier to handle.

This week we will observe the Thanksgiving holiday. And I hope yours is a joyful day filled with family and food and every good thing. But my hope for us all is that one day of thankfulness will spill over into every day of our lives. Which means being aware; *making* yourself aware of the ways you are blessed; pointing them out; making a list, speaking their names; recognizing their inherent goodness, and realizing that in them, your life is made better. It doesn't mean you won't have difficult days. You will. But in the midst of those difficult days, you will know that you are blessed by God through gifts great and small; in the love of family, in moments of peace, in miracles of healing, and maybe, just maybe even in the convenience of a parking spot. "Thank you, Lord, Thank you."

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Goodrich, Frances, and Albert Hackett. *It's a Wonderful Life*. Performance by Jimmy Stewart, and Donna Reed, Liberty Films/RKO Radio Pictures, 1946.