**BE GRATEFUL**

LOVING GENEROUSLY SERIES

BE GRATEFUL

September 25, 2016

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

**Luke 14:13-14 – tearing barriers**

**1 Chronicles 16:34**

**1 Thessalonians 5:18**

**Colossians 3:17**

**Philippians 4:6**

Lectionary Texts

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

So, there we were, walking through Wall-Mart near the home decorating department and a sign caught our eye. On the back it said that the MRSP was $39.95 but the sale sticker on the front was far less. For sale price of $4.95 it was a bargain (something I didn’t need at a price I couldn’t resist). So we made the purchase without certainty as to how it might be used. But, having thought about if for a little while, we thought that might provide a framework for our 2016 fall worship journey here at 1st Presbyterian Church. Each Sunday over the next six weeks we will be looking at one line from the sign.

Be Grateful

Work Hard

Believe in Yourself

Enjoy Life

Keep Your Promises

Give Freely

and to this list we will add a seventh line – “Love Generously.”

Now I must admit upfront that many popular clichés are automatically assumed to be truth. But they need to be examined and sometimes challenged. Eventually we’ll arrive at the line, “Believe in Yourself.” It occurred to me that many of us here would agree with most historians who argue whether or not Napoleon was “an enlightened despot who laid the foundations of modern Europe or a megalomaniac who wrought greater misery than any man before the coming of Hitler.” Some think that despite his military luck, that he was a little crazy, but we can’t say that he didn’t believe in himself. On the day that we consider this statement we’ll alter our plaque so that this line reads, “Believe in ~~Yourself~~ God.”

When people say that we need to believe in ourselves they are referencing a desire for confidence and courage. However, do we need to believe in ourselves or something larger than ourselves if we are to love generously? But, that is a question for another week. This Sunday we consider the recommendation that we “Be Grateful.”

Those of you who have been a part of a Mission Team from 1st Presbyterian Church, be you teenagers or adults, have usually returned to Pittsford with a profound sense of gratitude for the blessings that we habitually take for granted. The sheer day to day joy of those who have little or nothing has made us question our expectations about what will make us happy. The settings and locations for much of our mission work contrasts our abundance with the scarcity that we experience elsewhere. There is a vast gulf sitting between what we have come to do and use daily and the normal existence of those we have gone to serve. Some on mission teams come home grateful for flush toilets, running water, blankets, and small possessions. Others are grateful for paved roads, firm mattresses and freedom. We usually feel humbled filled with gratitude. This is the word that will be the background for what we explore today.

Before us this morning sits these three passages. There is one from 1 Chronicles that gives us some details about the return of the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines, that verse from Thessalonians to give thanks in all circumstances, and the story from Jesus that Luke recorded about the man who threw a great party and all of the excuses that people gave because they had other more important things to do. Now that story told so long ago by Jesus can almost sit by itself as a parable needing little illustration. It suggests that when Jesus invites us to a party, it would be wise to RSVP in the affirmative. It also says excuses are excuses and Jesus knows.

After becoming king of Israel, David was enormously triumphant in battle. In the glow of this success, he built houses for himself in Jerusalem and called the people together and told them of his intention to bring the Ark of God there. The Ark of God contained the tablets of the Law and it had been carried about from place to place during the days of Hebrew meandering in the Sinai. It was so holy that it was considered tantamount to the presence of God Himself.

At one point, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and this was humiliating to the Israelites. But, David and his army recaptured it. Well, actually the Philistines were willing to return it. According to the Bible the Philistines were pleased that they had possession of the Ark of the Covenant. They initially had the conviction that this would mean that they had also captured the God of the Israelites and that their God would likewise be subdued. However, the Philistines began to break out in tumors.

Well, that is the way the Revised Standard Version reads and when I once was sharing the account with a group of Jewish rabbis. They were following along, some in English, others in Hebrew when suddenly they broke out in thunderous laughter. I was lost. “What is so funny about tumors? It sounds enormously painful?” Then one of the rabbis clued me in and said, “Bruce, the translation you have is incomplete. The Hebrew word in this passage actually means ‘hemorrhoids.’ No amount of Preparation H could have eased their pain.” And so the Philistines actually wanted the Israelites to take the Ark back. In the Bible you can read of the Ark's transportation to Jerusalem from the house Abinadab. His sons Uzzah and Ahio drove the cart which carried it.

Singers and musicians were employed to accompany the Ark, and as it drew near to Jerusalem, David and his court went out to join the procession. So caught up in the excitement of it all was King David, that he took of his robe and danced wildly around the Ark with the others somewhat now embarrassingly in his underwear or less. David’s wife, Michal, observed this scene from the window and despised her husband for his exuberance. Already David had begun to praise God for his goodness, but Michal detested the whole affair.

David seemed to have one attitude, Michal a very different perspective, especially in terms of exuberance. But as the ark was brought to Jerusalem and set inside the tent pitched for it, offerings were given. The people who had gathered for this celebration were blessed by the king and then David distributed to every person alike - to each a loaf of bread, a portion of meat or wine and a cake of raisins. Now I really don't know the significance of these food items, but it sounds as if this was nearly a Thanksgiving dinner of sorts, not of turkeys and pumpkin pie, but a dinner of gratitude for the return of the ark celebrated with bread and wine and raisin cakes.

David then prepared a psalm of Thanksgiving for the occasion, a portion of which we read today.

It is a Psalm that was not so much copied into the book of Psalms, but into this book of 1 Chronicles.

*O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,*

*make known his deeds among the peoples.*

*Sing to him, sing praises to him,*

*tell of all his wonderful works.*

*Sing to the Lord all the earth,*

*Tell of his salvation day to day.*

*Declare his glory among the nations,*

*his marvelous works among all peoples.*

*For great is the Lord and greatly to be praise;*

*he is revered above all gods.*

*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;*

*bring an offering, and come before him*

*O Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;*

*for his steadfast love endures forever.*

*Then all the people said "Amen!" and praised the Lord.*

We don't know all the private factors behind the public rift between David and Michal and to be fair, it is quite possible that David was not an easy husband with whom to live. But if we can shut all that out and simply freeze the picture we are given here -the singing, the praise, the dancing, the rejoicing, the thanksgiving, the psalm - we wonder what she would have been doing with her raisin cake. How did it taste? What gratitude would have accompanied its eating?

We have a tendency to ooze some of the feelings of Michal at this moment. We look upon the world with unhappiness clouding our vision and we are uncomfortable with what we see and feel justified in our righteousness. Our souls can become embittered by bad experiences, or by envy and spite. We forget God's presence in what we are seeing and view instead the ugliness of scenes as they would be without God. We focus on the deteriorating aspects of the urban landscape and complain of the crime and traffic and smog and difficulty. We might be helped if we could more commonly express gratitude like David here or like Paul in our Thessalonians text.

(1 Th 5:13b‑18 NRSV) *Be at peace among yourselves. {14} And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. {15} See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. {16} Rejoice always, {17} pray without ceasing, {18} give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

*From the apostle Paul we learn three secrets of a thankful heart.*

Although we have observed in the past that it is hard to be simultaneously grateful and angry, we might glean a helpful perspective from Paul’s New Testament advice to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” statement. Perhaps we might uncover a few secrets about gratitude that could help us.

**SECRET #1**

**In order to be a thankful person, do not focus on the things you don’t have. Focus on the things you do have.**

In the Peanuts comic strip, Lucy and Linus are having a profound theological discussion. Lucy says, “Linus, I’m as low as I’ve ever been. Life is a drag. It is boring, it is so dull, it is blah.

Linus, Lucy’s brother, tries to cheer her up and says, “You know, Lucy, at times like this you really should count your blessings. You should think of all the things you have to be grateful for.”

“Ha” says Lucy. “That’s a good one! What do I have to be thankful for? I could count my blessings on one finger. What possibly do I have to be thankful for?”

Linus rather shyly said, “Well, for one thing, Lucy, you have a little brother who loves you.” Uncharacteristically Lucy is touched by this and she starts to cry. In the last scene of the comic strip, Linus smugly says to the camera, “Every now and then I say the right thing.”

Do you focus on what you don’t have or do you focus on what you do have?

Nadine Hammonds is from Memphis, Tennessee. At the age of 67 she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Bible Society primarily because she had memorized the whole New Testament. She didn’t just memorize 1 Corinthians 13, she memorized Romans 5 and Revelations 21 and all the hard stuff. At the awards ceremony someone asked her, “Nadine we were surprised to learn that you are blind. Are you resentful that you could never see?”

“Oh, my goodness, no,” she said. “I do wish I could see a sunset. I would love to see the ocean. I’d love to see the stars! But I learned a long time ago, you don’t focus on what you don’t have. I’d love to have those things, but I don’t focus on them. I think of what I do have. God gave me a sharp mind and a good memory!

Nadine’s brother is a portrait painter, and when he painted his sister for the occasion of this honor, he painted her with the most beautiful eyes . . . wide open. “Because,” her brother said, “My sister sees more than most people ever see in a lifetime.”

That is the first secret . . . don’t focus on what you don’t have, focus on the blessings you do have.

**SECRET #2**

**Do not focus on your present circumstances. Focus on the presence of Almighty God.**

Circumstantial focus can be displaced when we gain a clearer perception that God is present in the very midst of these circumstances that can be knotty, complex, and challenging. A perspective toward life that includes the presence of God will be harder to do for people of little or no faith. It may well be one of the reasons why it feels that gratitude is in shorter supply these days.

Clarence was a relatively poor man. He had a large family - six children - and money was usually scarce for them. When the children were small and needed shoes but needed a washing machine far worse. The old machine had simply coughed its last breath.

Clarence saw an ad in the paper for a second-hand machine and went to look at it. The address led him to a well-to-do neighborhood with manicured lawns and street lamps. The further into the neighborhood he went the more envious he became until the envy gave way to down-right frustration and anger. And by the time he rang the doorbell he was at a boil on the inside. Why did some people have so much and others so very little?

Charlotte answered the door. "You can have it for five dollars," she said, and invited him inside. Clarence began to simmer down and the low price cheered him considerably - so much, in fact, that he found himself confessing to them what a hard time his family was having, and how three of his children had worn out shoes. Too much rope skipping and braking on the tricycle they shared had done a number on them.

Straining to scrutinize past the entrance hall Clarence tried to affirm them, "You must be very happy." Charlotte turned suddenly and left the room.

Clarence was stunned and apologized to George, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend your wife."

"O, you didn't offend her. You see, we have only one child - our daughter, and she's never been able to walk."

Clarence concluded arrangements for the washing machine and went home. He entered his bedroom, closed the door, got down on his knees and asked God to forgive him for fretting about life's inconvenience. “Thank you Lord that you have blessed us with these children. They are a blessing to us. I pray for George and Charlotte and for the heartache they feel. Lord, if it is your will, may their daughter be healed and one day be able to walk.” He tiptoed into a room that his children shared and found the three pairs of shoes that were worn from skipping and braking. He held them close and thanked God that they were so worn.

We focus too much on the circumstances in our lives and fail to see the presence of Jesus, a perspective of grace and gratitude in the midst of what some might see only as scarcity. It is a secret, if you would have a thankful heart, don’t focus on present circumstances, focus on the presence of God. It makes all the difference.

**SECRET #3**

**If you want to be a person with soft heart of gratitude rather than a heart of stone, focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you.**

The word in the Greek language for servant is spelled, t-h-e-r-a-p-o-n. From the word “servant” in Greek (“therapon”) we get the English word, “therapy.”

The best therapy is helping someone rather than thinking, “Why didn’t someone thank me? Why didn’t I get a thank-you-note? Why didn’t I get a word of encouragement or appreciation?” Instead, helping others with their needs will help you with yours!

Paul Beyer was working on his farm in Lancaster a long time ago when he was stopped by Pop Swychert. Pop said to him, “Paul, for nine years I’ve been taking food from Lancaster County to a little mission in New York. I’m getting too old to make the trip. You’re 31 and strong. Could you make the trip for me this year?

Well, Paul had made the trip for 39 years, delivering food donated from the farms of Lancaster County, PA to a mission in New York City. He packed the truck, drove it, and unloaded it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A reporter from the *New York Times,* once said to Paul Beyer, “Paul, this is a miracle! For 38 years you’ve driven all this food to New York.”

Paul replied, “That’s not the miracle. The miracle is for 38 years I’ve driven all this food to New York City and never once gotten a traffic ticket.”

“Why do you do this,” asked the reporter. “You’ve got another job. You’ve got a family; you’ve got responsibilities. Why do you do it?

Paul gave a one-word reply:

“Gratitude.”

If you focus on the why’s and the why not’s of your present circumstances, you are in serious danger of missing out on life. You can become so full of resentment and bitterness that you may miss the things God’s given you.

We are eager to be redeemed and saved by God through Jesus Christ, but how many of us are as eager to embrace his Lordship and become disciples. There is a recognition that discipleship will mean discipline. There will be spiritual disciplines of meditation, prayer, study, fasting, solitude, worship . . .spiritual disciplines of confession and submission, simplicity, gratitude and service.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Richard J. Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline* suggests that if we even considered the outward expression of simplicity from among these disciplines we would begin to:

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status, their utility rather than their prestige.
2. Reject anything which produces unhealthy addictions. Refuse to be a slave to anything
3. Develop the habit of giving things away. We usually have much that needs to be sorted, stored, dusted and restored.
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. Do we really need to have the latest i-phone? Many timesaving devices save little time. Beware of the words, "It will pay for itself in six months.” Most gadgets are built to break down and wear out and some complicate our lives rather than enhance them.
5. Learn to enjoy what you don't have to own: a blue sky, the beach, the library, the park.
6. Develop an appreciation for creation. Marvel at the texture of grass and the rich colors of the rainbow
7. Reject things that will breed the oppression of others.

Focus on what you do have, not on what you don’t have. Focus on the presence of Jesus, not on present circumstances, no matter how bad they may be. Focus on how you can serve other people, not on how they can serve you. Then, perhaps you will claim that your favorite word . . . like Paul Beyer’s is “Gratitude!”

1. From a Sermon by Tom Tewell, pastor of the 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York, preached November 21, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)