



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On Being Grateful

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But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you (1 Chronicles 29:14).

You may have heard that a Southwest Airlines 737 made an emergency landing at Philadelphia International Airport on Tuesday after a piece of one engine broke off more than 30,000 feet over eastern Pennsylvania. An explosion sent debris into the fuselage and blew out a window, bringing the oxygen masks down in the cabin.

The passengers, of course, were badly shaken and afraid. Several were injured, and one eventually died. A couple from Texas, the Tumlinsons, sent text messages to their children, saying that the plane was going down, and that they loved them. They probably weren't the only ones to do that.

Meanwhile, Tammie Jo Shults, the pilot, was talking to air-traffic controllers. When a controller asked if the plane was on fire, she said calmly, "No, it's not on fire, but part of it is missing." You can go to news reports online and listen to the calmness in her voice. One of the passengers said later, "She has nerves of steel."

In between talking with controllers on the ground, Captain Shults was also trying to reassure the passengers. "We're descending, we're not going down," she said. "We're descending; just stay calm, brace yourselves. Everybody keep your masks on."

The captain's calm under pressure is part of her personality, and it's also a part of her training. Ms. Shults

was among the first female fighter pilots in the US Navy, so she broke through not only the sound barrier but a gender barrier as well.

The captain radioed that the plane had “149 souls” on board. That may be just the way pilots talk when they need to tell people on the ground what’s happening, but as it turns out, Captain Shults is a committed Christian, so she may well have meant something more as she thought about all those lives that were in her hands. A modest person, focused on the well-being of others rather than claiming credit for herself, she declined to talk to reporters afterwards. Her mother-in-law said, “I know God was with her, and I know she was talking to God.”

Tammie Jo Shults is a graduate of Midwest America Nazarene University, where the website says, “We are a Christian university that nurtures Christlike community, pursues academic excellence and cultivates a passion to serve.” Not surprisingly, the website now has a link to the story of their distinguished alumna, whom many others are calling a hero this week.

“A Christlike community with a passion to serve” is what every Christian body ought to be, whether it’s a church or a school or a university. The passion to serve comes from the model we have in Christ, who pours himself out for all of our souls, and from the Holy Spirit, who gives us grace to become more like Christ, if that’s the kind of person we want to be.

Another survivor from Southwest flight 1380, a Mr. Martinez, said, “All the passengers wanted to know who we owed our lives to.” That’s the kind of question we might all ask ourselves, because the answer could only make as

grateful, and gratitude is a source of deep joy.

Gratitude makes us happy for lots of reasons. For one thing, it often means that someone was thinking of us. Somebody gives us a gift, or sends a card, or does some other nice thing, and it's a sign that they thought enough of us to do that. "Thanks so much," we say. "That was very kind. You didn't need to do it." To be remembered kindly is to know that we matter, and our gratitude is part of what feels so good in response.

Scientific studies in recent years have shown the benefits we derive, not just from receiving gifts, but from the feeling of gratitude itself. Gratitude opens the door to new and better relationships, because everyone likes people who appreciate what they do. It improves mental health by driving out toxic emotions like envy and frustration; and because our state of mind so strongly affects our whole body, gratitude improves physical health and longevity too. Grateful people sleep better, since they're more at peace, and they have better self-esteem because they don't waste time and energy dwelling on unhealthy comparisons with other people.

Gratitude fosters resilience, and it makes us more empathetic and less aggressive toward others. Gratitude strengthens community, as grateful people are glad to give and eager to serve. Giving and serving bring them joy, in contrast to those with a strong sense of entitlement, who cling to what they have because they think they deserve it. Possessive people tend to see possessions as signs of their worth, which is why they often want others to see them too. When they give at all, they give rather grudgingly because, if they really think they deserve all that they have, then sharing feels like a kind of deprivation.

Grateful people, on the other hand, consider it a privilege to be able to give. We see that so beautifully in the story of King David and the people bringing their gifts to build a temple in gratitude and devotion to God. David is approaching the end of his life, and he's thinking about his legacy. His young son Solomon will soon be king, and David wants to be sure that future generations remember and honor God in the way that he and his generation have learned to depend on God, and give God thanks. David, as king, has the most to share, so he takes the lead in giving to help build the temple, and the people all follow suit as each of them is able.

The striking thing is that they do all this gladly, not grudgingly. David doesn't have to coax his people to give because they're already grateful to God, and grateful hearts are generous hearts. In fact, David feels it's a great privilege for him and his people to build this space to worship God, as a sign of their gratitude for all God's gifts.

"Who am I, and what is my people," David asks in a public prayer, "that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." David knows that everything he can give already belongs to God. It's not that David is being so generous, to share a portion of his private wealth with God. On the contrary, he understands that he's just giving back to God some of what God has lent him. David knows that none of us truly owns anything in the end. We're all just stewards, borrowing some things from God for a while, and accountable to God for whatever we do before we have to give them back.

"I know, my God, that you search the heart and are pleased with integrity," David says, "and now I have seen

your people offering freely and joyously to you.” David and his people have been through a lot, and they have not always done what was right. But now they bring their gifts to serve God, and it makes them glad to be able to give. “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our ancestors,” David prays, looking back to those who have gone before, “keep such purposes and thoughts forever in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.” God is so good, and we’re all so totally dependent on God, that on top of all the other gifts God has given us, we even need to ask for the gift of a glad and grateful and generous heart.

Most people admire generosity, no doubt because we were made in the image of God, and God is nothing if not generous. What kind of soul admires selfishness and greed, after all, except a soul that’s already becoming selfish and greedy?

We admire generosity, not least because it brings joy in both directions. When we’re on the receiving end, it makes us grateful and glad. And when our souls stretch enough to be on the giving end, that makes us happy too. When Jesus says it’s more blessed to give than to receive, he’s not lifting up some abstract ideal; he’s stating a simple fact. It feels good to give. And for a soul that’s growing into the likeness of Christ, an opportunity to give is just one more occasion for gratitude and joy.



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