



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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A Bridge of Thanksgiving

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And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

Brian Bauknight, a former senior pastor of Christ United Methodist Church, where I served as a young associate years ago, tells of a group of friends who got together over Thanksgiving. They were reminiscing about people who had been important in their lives, and one of them mentioned his middle school teacher, Mrs. Simpson, who introduced him to Tennyson, the poet laureate of England, whose writing he learned to love. A member of the group asked whether Mrs. Simpson knew what an impact she had made on his life, and he said, “No. I never told her.”

Prompted by that conversation, the middle-aged man sat down to write a Thanksgiving letter, not even sure whether his teacher was still alive. It took a while for the letter to reach her, but shortly after it did, he received this hand-written reply:

My dear Willie [which he had not been called in many years]:

I remember well your enthusiasm for Tennyson and the Idylls of the King when I read them to you. You were so beautifully responsive. My reward for telling you about Tennyson did not have to wait until your belated note of thanks that came to me in my old age. I saw your eager response when you were in my class.

You will be interested to know that I taught school for fifty years. In all that time, yours is the first

note of appreciation I have ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered my lonely old heart as nothing has cheered me in many years.

So my first question this morning is, Who are the Mrs. Simpsons in your life? Who are the people that have made your life richer and fuller and better, and have you told them how important they've been to you? There may still be time. This season between Thanksgiving and Christmas is an especially good time to offer a word of thanks for the great gifts someone has given you.

I listened to and participated in a number of conversations about thanksgiving and gratitude around the holiday last week. They were all enlightening, and some were quite moving. One thing I noticed was how some of the stories were about being grateful to someone in particular, but many were just expressions of thanksgiving in general.

One woman on the radio said she was thankful that her son started kindergarten this year. The reason it meant so much to her was that her little boy had leukemia, and she wasn't sure he would live long enough to get to kindergarten; but he did, and she was thankful for that. People talked about being thankful that they found a job after being unemployed, or that someone they loved got over an illness. Lots of people were just thankful for a chance to get together with family or friends for the holiday.

It's good to be grateful, of course – much better than being ungrateful. We've all known people for whom someone went out of their way to do something nice, and the person who received all that kindness never showed any sign of appreciation. "What an ingrate!" we say. To call a person ungrateful points to a kind of moral failure, doesn't it?

Because generosity forms a link between the giver and the one who receives, and being ungrateful feels like a way of denying the connection.

We know that it's better to be grateful than ungrateful, and those blessed souls who come to a place of more-or-less permanent gratitude enjoy a far more peaceful and contented life than the rest of us. Gratitude drives out smaller, more self-absorbed feelings. It's hard to be deeply thankful and have any room left in your heart for bitterness or anger or resentment. That's why we call those states of mind *grateful* and *thankful*: they're full of gratitude and thanksgiving, and therefore full of joy and contentment too.

Still, I found myself wondering last week whether thanksgiving and gratitude should have some person as their object. Is it enough to be thankful in the abstract – a sort of free-floating gratitude in general – or is it better to thank someone in particular for whatever good things we enjoy?

If I say, “Thank you,” my thanksgiving has a person for its object. It's *you* that I'm thanking. If you give me a gift, and I say, “Thank you so much,” I'm not just grateful that I have the gift; I'm grateful to you for giving it to me. A gift lays down a bridge of relationship between one person and another, and gratitude is like crossing over the bridge and connecting in a way that strengthens and deepens that relationship.

Every good gift comes with a return address for gratitude, like those tags we find on Christmas presents that say, “To Sue, from Mom.” Mom hopes Sue will like her gift, and she watches Sue's expression as she opens it, hoping for signs of delight and thanksgiving, and fearing any hint of disappointment or indifference. “Oh, Mom! Thank you so

much. I love it!” is music to Mom’s ears. On the other hand, a response like “I have three of these already, and you know I hate purple” brings a cold front over the Christmas tree, and seriously dampens the conversation at dinner.

Most of the time, when people give gifts, they just hope the recipient will like them. Their motive is mainly to bring someone a little joy. “I know she’ll like this,” we say. “I’ll get it for her for Christmas.” A sincere word of appreciation, then, acts almost like a little sacrament – a sign and seal of the connection between the giver of the gift and the one who receives it.

Sometimes words of thanksgiving are coerced, of course. When children are young, they have to be taught what to say, and the importance of saying it. “Tell Grandma ‘Thank you,’” we say; and that’s all right for now, but Grandma hopes that before too long, the thanks will come without having to be coaxed. Gratitude freely given is a bond of relationship, so that generosity and gratefulness go back and forth across the bridge that connects two people.

All of this brings us, again, back to God. I often hear people express thanksgiving in general, a sort of free-floating gratitude. Less often do I hear them thanking God directly and explicitly. And I wonder why that is.

Some people’s reluctance to thank God explicitly may reflect a lingering sense of entitlement. I see lots of people who cling not only to whatever they have, but also to the feeling that they’ve earned it and therefore deserve it. If I think I deserve everything I have, then I don’t really feel that I owe anything to anyone.

To start thanking God directly for all sorts of things might feel like the edge of a slippery slope. When I begin to be grateful to God for every blessing in my life, where does it end? What do I have, after all, that is not ultimately a gift from God? Even if I've worked hard to acquire what I have, where did my health and strength and intelligence and energy come from to do that work? Can I really take credit for those things too? And where did my life itself come from, and who decides what will become of me when this life is over?

Once we start thinking about all that we owe to God, and all the reasons we have to be grateful to God, it looks as though gratitude might begin to run rampant. Then what would happen to our sense of entitlement?

We can see, I think, why many people walk part way across the bridge of thanksgiving but stop somewhere in the middle. Most of us know that being entirely ungrateful is unbecoming. We don't want to be like that, so we leave the side of the stream where ingratitude dwells and cross over far enough to be grateful in general, at least for the blessings we know we don't deserve. But then we stay stuck in the middle, reluctant to cross all the way over to God on the other side – maybe because we know that the more clearly we see the generosity and goodness of God, the more we'll have to leave behind our old identity of deserving and take on a new identity grounded in grace and gratitude.

And with our new self-image would also come a greater sense of obligation to God, since gratitude sees the moral claim that generosity lays upon us. Do you remember those old Western movies where someone would do a cowboy a favor, and the cowboy would tip his hat and reply, "Much obliged, Ma'am"? It's a great expression, and we

ought to bring it back and start using it again. “Obliged” comes from the Latin *obligare*, meaning “to bind together.” Obligation binds us to one another, the way ligaments, from the same root, bind bones to hold the body together.

It’s not hard to see why people might be cautious about the way they give thanks. But what if we could be braver, and cross all the way over the bridge of thanksgiving to God, to a constant awareness that every good thing in life really is a gift from God? Well then, as somebody said in our men’s group last Tuesday, our whole life would become a kind of living prayer. We’d find ourselves doing naturally what St. Paul urges us to do in his letter to the Colossians: We would in fact be thankful, pretty much all of the time.

And after a while, if we really let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, reminding us of God’s amazing grace, we might find ourselves living more and more for the sake of Jesus, giving thanks to God through him. Then we wouldn’t have to cling to anything else for our identity or sense of security, because Christ himself would be king for us, and that would be more than enough to give us peace.



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