

Our Hymn of Grateful Praise

Worship Series on Gratitude

We're going out on a limb here. The Worship Team at Discipleship Ministries remains committed to providing resources for lectionary worship on a regular basis. We will continue to do so as we move toward Advent of Year B in a few weeks. But as we were planning for the end of Year A, we believe that we were led by the Spirit to do something a little different for these last three weeks. So, we are temporarily stepping away from the lectionary to provide a short worship series on "Gratitude."

While we are aware that many churches run a stewardship campaign in the fall, this series is not intended to be about the pledge card. Rather, this is a reflection on the spiritual attribute of living a life of thankfulness. Our commitment to giving, however, is certainly tied up with gratitude, and you are welcome to use these resources to craft your campaign if you choose. And if you have already completed your stewardship emphasis, you can bookmark this series and come back to it next year. We suggest, on the other hand, that you let this be a support to your year-round emphasis on giving and gratitude and let it stand on its own as one of the marks of the disciple. Here in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving Day in the USA, we wanted to give an opportunity to worship teams to extend that celebration beyond a single day or week and explore what a life of gratitude might look like.

We also understand that there are those pastors and worship teams committed to a faithful following of the lectionary. If that is the case, here are links to the lectionary texts for the past two Year A cycles. Even if you have used them before, they could be a refresher for your congregation.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/there-is-now>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/season-of-saints-2017-series-overview>

If you are inclined, however, give this a try. We also hope to provide more non-lectionary or theme-based worship series in the months ahead. So, keep an eye out for those. In the meantime, we invite you to explore "Our Hymn of Grateful Praise."

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 12, 2023 - Enter the Gates
[Psalm 100](#)
Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Three weeks before the end of the liturgical year, and we turn to gratitude as the guiding theme for worship. What does a life of gratitude look like? Or perhaps more importantly, what does it feel like? When we invite others to join us as we are being made into disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we are looking to live a life of service and joy. We are being invited to consider our common humanity, our shared experience of living in a world that has heartache and struggle, but also profound joy and satisfaction that is deep and true and binding of heart to heart. And it all grows out of an awareness of the interconnectedness of life, which opens us up to living in gratitude. That's what we celebrate this week as we worship.

Our gratitude begins with God, of course. So, sing our songs of praise and thanksgiving – enter the gates with thanksgiving. Let our worship begin and end in our acknowledgment of the God who provides and who is present always. But let us also give thanks for the church, the family with whom we worship; let us be bound together in singing and praying and mutual love and support.

Whom should the worship team identify to thank during worship for these three weeks? What workers have been ignored or forgotten? Whom does no one know about and yet worship wouldn't happen without them? Or mission and ministry wouldn't happen without them? Who looks after the children? Who cleans the building? We want to express our gratitude in real ways to real people. Let's make a list.

But like everything we do in the church, we cannot be only inward looking. Whom can we identify in our community that we need to thank in a public way? What servants, what workers, and what segment of your population can you point out for giving thanks. True, we are almost two weeks from Thanksgiving, but our hope is that we could expand that observance and begin this week by reflecting on how we live thankfully every day of our lives.

PREACHING NOTES

Wait. Are we talking about gratitude or about joy? Yes! We are staking a claim in this series that gratitude and joy are intertwined. In some ways, they are indistinguishable. Certainly, from the outside, joy looks like gratitude and gratitude looks like joy. We could get into a chicken and egg kind of conversation here if we wanted to. Does a life of gratitude lead to joy? Or does a joyful outlook make us more grateful? Again, we can only say ... Yes! It would be hard to differentiate between the two. So, let's not even try. Our hymn of grateful praise is a joyous song to sing.

So, we begin with a familiar song. Psalm 100 is an interesting psalm that straddles categories and defies being put into a simple box. It follows a series of enthronement psalms and has some similarities with them, though it is not usually considered one. It follows a familiar pattern of a praise psalm, but tosses in a verse that stands apart, in a way. The superscription seems straightforward, but it also presents a

puzzle. This psalm is all over the place, which might be a perfect way to describe a life of joyful gratitude. It's all over the place.

The superscription simply says, "a psalm of thanksgiving." What could there be to argue there? Not argue, *per se*, but point out that the word here could mean being thankful in a general sense, or it could mean making a sacrifice on the altar in worship. We could suggest that both are useful for us in understanding the life of gratitude that we're called to. On the one hand, there is the idea that thankfulness covers all of life; it is our way of approaching the world and the attitudes with which we choose to live. On the other hand, there is a clear indication that we are making a commitment to God in our choice to live a grateful life. A sacrifice means that there is some cost, some effort on our part. We surrender our inclinations to think the world revolves around us. We bow down in service, looking to the needs of others before our own needs.

We enter the gates with thanksgiving. But what does that mean? Do we come to church with grateful hearts? Well, of course, we do. But more than that, we pass through every door with gratitude in our minds and hearts. We enter our own homes, grateful for the family of which we are a part. We go out into the world grateful for the abundance we take for granted way too often. We encounter others and give thanks for the gift of life that they are, even the ones we sometimes struggle to get along with.

This lifestyle is our joyful noise. This isn't about singing songs. Or maybe it is, but our songs may be spoken as well as sung. We are using our presence to bring joy into the world around us. And it only takes a quick look around to see how countercultural such an idea really is. We are called to worship the Lord with gladness. But the word translated as *worship* does not mean a worship service; it means a *worship-centered life*. Yes, what we do in the hour we gather with the body in the sanctuary of the church matters, and we ought to do it with as much gratitude and joy as we can muster. But to "worship the Lord with gladness" is what we do in our homes and places of work, in our neighborhoods, and on our playgrounds. We live out the worship of God by giving thanks anywhere and everywhere we can. As noisily as possible.

There are imperatives throughout this short psalm. Worship! Enter! Give thanks! Make a joyful noise! But there is one in the middle that looks different. *Know*. There are lots of things that we can do and need to do. But we are also commanded by the psalmist to *know*. There is something driving all that doing; there is something behind this joyful gratitude. We know that the Lord is God. Look at how the verse describes that knowing: "It is he that made us, and we are his." The pronouns for God surround the pronouns for us and then are repeated: "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." It is this boundedness of our lives in God that brings forth the gratitude we are invited to express with joy. We have been gathered up; we belong; we are a part of something that is infinitely bigger than we can see. Of course, gratitude is the only proper response. Especially when the psalm concludes with a description of this God who has gathered us. The Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all generations. Amen and amen.

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost- In Everything
November 19, 2023
[Philippians 4:4-13](#)
Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

This is Thanksgiving week, so it is an appropriate time to reflect on the pervasiveness of the life of gratitude that the gospel suggests. So, this week we turn to that familiar passage from Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Here again, we find that gratitude and joy are woven together and that it is sometimes hard to tell one from the other. But it does reveal that our consideration of a life of gratitude should be exuberant, marked by the joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

What can we sing with a light heart today? What prayers can we offer that might tap into the sense of interconnectedness and belonging? How can we celebrate the community that we are and the community that we are becoming? Let there be space for saying *thank you* to one another and to God. Let the passing of the peace include time to find someone each would like to thank for their words or deeds or presence. This could be a guided prayer time or simply an open sharing time. Let the buzz of conversation reflect the joy of the fellowship around us.

This is not to say, even here on the threshold of Thanksgiving, that there isn’t room for grief or sadness. Suffering strikes even during the holiday season. Some might be dreading gathering with family, knowing there is pain there. Offer compassion as you sing and as you pray. Remind people that there is a community of faith that surrounds them with caring and gratitude and peace. Pray for contentment in the midst of difficult circumstances. We don’t ask to accept the brokenness or endure abuse, but note that we see beyond the pain of the moment to a wholeness that is offered. We give thanks for the promises of God, even when we can’t feel them at the moment.

Send the congregation out to embrace the world that surrounds them with gratitude and joy; see what transformation might begin around us and within us. In everything, give thanks.

PREACHING NOTES

It was one of those deeply philosophical kinds of questions that occupy your thinking in the middle of the night. You know, those after-hours bull sessions, trying to top one another with Zen-like wisdom and riddles. “So how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” “If God is all-powerful, can he make a rock so big he can’t lift it?” “Why don’t Brussels sprouts make you fat?” You know—all the big questions that you ponder when you’re supposed to be doing your calculus homework in your college dorm room.

And then someone said, “If you are a Christian, should it show?”

“What?”

“You know, should people be able to tell by looking at you that you are a Christian?”

“What, do you mean we should wear name tags or something, like, ‘Hi, I’m a Christian!’”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

“Do you mean, we should wear prayer caps, or shawls, or special shoes or something?”

“Special shoes?”

“No, I mean, ‘Should it show?’”

Should it show? Our faith, I mean. Should passersby be able to look at us and know that we are followers of Jesus? Should it show?

On the one hand, of course, that is nonsense. Only God is able to see into the heart to know what is true and what is a facade. That’s why Jesus warns us over and over not to be so judgmental. We are so quick to decide who is in and who is out, and we can so often make a mistake because we don’t have the vision of God. We don’t know what core beliefs or defining experiences have shaped this person we are attempting to judge. So, that is a task better left to God. And we stick with the business of invitation, inclusion, and instruction. We learn and grow together as though everyone was welcome—because they are.

But, on the other hand, we all know that our faith is not simply a head thing. It is not just a set of beliefs that we hold to be true. Faith is instead a way of living, a way of being in the world. This means that our question is not so nonsensical after all. Should it show? Yes, it should show. Our faith should be shown in what we do and say; it should be shown in the choices we make and the priorities we set. It should be shown in our habits and in our attendance at public corporate worship.

All of that is true. But I think there is something more—something more that should show because of our faith; something more that should be in us and come out from us, so that everyone around us sees that something. That something is *gratitude*. We are the ones who live thankfully, who live aware of what others have done and are doing for us. We acknowledge a debt, a relationship, a “being with” that others might not recognize. Gratitude is what should show to the rest of the world, as we live and move and have our being—not, however, a begrudging gratitude or a thankfulness pulled out of us by a stern parent leaning down to ask us, “Now, what do you say?” Ours is exuberant gratitude that reflects our wonder at being alive in this interwoven world. And when you read Paul, at times, it seems that he gets gratitude mixed up with joy.

In Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit, joy is second after love. Or joy is first if you believe, as I do, that the fruit is love and that the other eight are aspects, or definitions, of that love. The fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, is love that is joy-filled. Yes, it is also peaceful and patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle and self-controlled; but first, it is Joyful.

Paul was big on joy. It keeps coming up in his writing. Probably the most well-known passage is the reading we chose for this week. Most biblical scholars say that this passage is a conglomeration of a number of different sayings. Maybe, they argue, it was all written down at one time, but most likely this passage bears the hand of at least one and maybe many different editors, adding in bits and pieces to fill out the list of exhortations. Or maybe it was all Paul, just running down his checklist without regard to the content or narrative flow. This is like a shopping list or a menu from a Chinese restaurant, one from column a, and one from column b.

I’m not so sure. Maybe it is my imagination, but I see coherence here. I think Paul is trying to define joy in these verses. This is a recipe for the joy entree. That might explain why it feels disjointed; but in fact, it all comes together to produce something whole and satisfying and delicious, to boot!

Joy, says Paul, is revealed in gentleness, in how we treat those around us, in how we respond to slights against us, and in how we reach out to those who are hurt. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone," says Paul. Let it show. Joy is found in the knowledge and experience of the nearness of God (The Lord is near), a nearness that diminishes anxiety and brings out a willingness to connect with God with gratitude and with hope (in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God). Joy is found in that communion, that peaceful confidence that comes from living in Christ.

So, how do we get it? How do we live in this joy? By filling ourselves with the good things of God's creation – "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (verse 8). "Think about these things," he writes; live in these things; fill yourself up with these things. And, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, he writes. There it is - joy blends into gratitude. Joy is the face of a grateful heart. Joy is the center of grateful living.

Then, he says, live in community; that's where we find joy. It is a corporate experience, not an individual one. Find a mentor, someone who can show you the faith at work, someone who walks the walk. (*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me*, v9). Engage in acts of kindness; give, serve, love. Also, be content where you are; bloom where you are planted instead of always wishing things were different. And finally, take risks. Step out in faith, knowing that as long as you walk with God, you cannot fail. (*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*, v.13).

Paul says he has learned the secret to this joy, and it must be that joy is powered by gratitude. Grateful joy, then is dynamic, the result of an ongoing relationship and way of living that keeps us engaged with God and with people. And it leaks out as we engage with others; it shapes our language and our vision. In short, it shows. In everything we do, in who we are, in the attitudes we present, in the face we offer to the world, it shows. So, let it show.

Christ the King / Reign of Christ Sunday - After Giving Thanks

November 26, 2023

[John 6:5-23](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

If the Sunday before Thanksgiving invited us to look at the community and the family that surrounds us, this Sunday encourages us to look up to the Christ as we give thanks for the kingdom he asks us to see and to lean into. This week casts back over the journey we have made with Christ from Advent to Christ the King Sunday. We anticipated his coming – the first time and the promised return to bring the new heavens and the new earth. We heard the voice pronounce God’s blessing at his baptism by John at the river Jordan; we fasted with him in the desert and saw him tempted to take the easy route. We heard him reject that temptation and then saw the results as he walked the way of sorrows through suffering to death on a cross. We rejoiced with incredible joy when Easter morning dawned with a risen Son and a promise of eternity within our grasp. We heard his commissioning to go into all the world and make disciples, and we saw him rising to his proper place, to his enthronement in the very presence of God. We felt the gift of his Spirit blow through us like wind and fire as we sought to be the church at work in the world. And now we bow before the one who loved us, who claimed us and redeemed us; and we sing praise and thanksgiving for that blessing and that hope.

Sing the songs of the faith, the ancient ones sung from the beginnings of the church and the modern ones that tap into who we are today as we seek to give praise to Christ. Let the congregation lose themselves in adoration. Let them hear the word with anticipation and with expectation. Catch a glimpse of the risen One among you; feel the breath of the Spirit and know that God is present in worship today.

This is a week for creeds or an affirmation of faith. Again, you can use one of the traditional ones in the back of the hymnal, or you can find a more recent one that speaks in a language that seems more familiar. Or you may even write one yourself. Make it a Sunday school project in the weeks leading up to this celebration. Ask the youth to share one or more of the confirmation creeds— if they wrote them. This would be a great way to affirm and thank the younger ones in the community who may not feel that they have a voice in the larger conversation of the church. Take a poll in the weeks leading up to this week, asking which creed is the favorite and why. Did they memorize one for a class or for confirmation? Do they remember saying it at home or in a previous church setting? Find the words of faith, the words that honor the reign of Christ that speak to those who come to worship this week.

Thanksgiving may have passed again, but gratitude continues. Can we give thanks in everything?

PREACHING NOTES

This is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. The only one. That's kind of amazing when you think about it. For some reason, this picnic captured the imagination of all the gospel writers. What was it about this story, I wonder, that made them all make sure to record it?

Maybe all the gospel writers just liked picnics. Actually, there is so much going on in these verses that it is hard to narrow it down for the purpose of this writing. We could talk about John's clues hidden in the text. For example, whenever there is a mountain in the scenery, it is a sign that something important is going to happen. Mountains are where divine-human conversations take place. But here, Jesus sits down, a sign that this is a teaching moment. He's got something to get across, something important. And also, John says "the Passover was near," another signal that this is an important moment in Jesus' life and death.

We could talk about the fact that three of the four gospel writers link the feeding story to the walking on water story. There is something important there too, it seems. Perhaps it is that hunger and fear are two needs that are universal in our human experience and meeting those needs is important for Jesus.

We could even talk about the fact that both stories end with attempts to control Jesus - failed attempts at that. This is a reminder that Jesus doesn't come to us on our terms. but on his. And just in time.

There's even more; but instead of all of that, I want to talk about the picnic. It's more than a picnic; it is a pop quiz. Jesus tests Philip. Jesus asks, "Where?" and Philip hears, "How much?" **Bzzz**. Thank you for playing. Andrew stumbles on a boy with lunch but is pretty sure it won't be nearly enough. **Bzzz**. Another one bites the dust. Their vision was limited. Their seeing was misdirected. They, as usual, didn't understand. And what, exactly didn't they understand? The physics of fish division? The parsing of barley loaves?

Like the disciples, we get caught up in the limitations or in the "how." We want to explain how it happened. Maybe, we say, maybe when Jesus started, people fessed up and shared what they brought; it was a miracle of sharing. Maybe. But that seems to diminish the real direction contained within the story. This was a story of a *who* and not a *how*—a couple of *whos*.

The first *who* was Jesus. "Where will we buy the bread?" he asked Philip. From you, was the right answer. When he scares the dickens out of the disciples by walking on the water, he says, "I am, don't be afraid." "I am?" Doesn't that sound familiar? "I am sending you," said a curiously combustible bush a long time ago. The *who* is Jesus, the *meeter* of needs, the worker of miracles.

The second *who* is us, or them, the 5,000 hungry ones on the side of the mountain. Who are us too, by the way, John says with an elbow to the ribs. Get it? We are hungry for something we can't provide for ourselves. But we are invited to a picnic. Jesus says, "Have the people sit down." But the word used for *sit down* really means "take a place at the table." "Sit down to dinner," we might translate: Jesus says, "Have the people pull a chair up to the table." We are guests at the Lord's table. That's the gospel, the miracle here. Then Jesus says to gather up the leftovers so that nothing is wasted. That's a sure sign of the kingdom, of the new community; there are no leftovers - food or people. Nothing is thrown aside; nothing is not valued. We are guests at the Lord's table, not afterthoughts or nuisances. Welcomed, invited, included. Part of the family.

But there is something that stands out from this family picnic on the grass—something that is memorable, at least to John if to no one else. So, we have the meal miracle; then we have the walking on water miracle (and we can save that one for another sermon, don't you think?). Then we have a waiting crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of the miracle worker, hoping to get another slice of that bread. If we keep reading beyond our text for today, we find Jesus getting a little peeved with them for the bread thing, since he thinks they are missing the point. But maybe John is the one who got the point. And we know that by how he describes the event. Did you see it? It's there in the final verse of our text. The people were hanging out in the place where it happened. The miracle place. But John doesn't call it a miracle place. He says that it is the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

Really? That's the description? Not where an amazing thing happened. Not where the unexplainable took place. No, where they ate after the Lord had given thanks. Think about it. That's what John wants us to remember: that this meal, this miracle happened after gratitude was expressed. Gratitude for the abundance that didn't look like abundance. Gratitude for the satisfaction that came out of hunger. Gratitude becomes a way of seeing and a way of being in the world. We give thanks to God for what is about to happen. We give thanks for what we might not yet see, but what we trust God will provide.

This series has not been about a stewardship campaign, though it might accompany one. Instead, it is about the spiritual discipline of gratitude. Like any discipline, it is one that we choose and then work at until we become better at it. We live, because of that choice, grateful to God first of all for the abundance that surrounds us. But gratitude spills over into the rest of our lives as well. We are grateful for those in our circles of care; we are grateful to those who help us live in the manner to which we have become accustomed. We recognize that none of the benefits we enjoy come without effort on someone's part, and we learn to be grateful to those who help make our society run smoothly. If we were to make a list of all those who provide for us, who care for us, who stand with us, we would probably never get to the end. We are truly woven together in a human tapestry of love and caring. Jesus invites us to become more aware of that reality and to live gratefully every day.