

## A Community of Thanksgiving

By

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Colossians 3:12-17

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 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 3:12-17 (NRSV)

Let us pray. *Gracious God open us up to whatever it is you have for us today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and then open up our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When I was in League City there was a teenager, a young man in our church who was just kind of awkward. He was kind of out of shape physically and didn't do particularly well in school. He kind of held his head down and wouldn't talk to you or look you in the eye. He didn't have a lot of friends. When he graduated from high school and I don't know if this was his parents' decision or his, he signed up for the army. So off he went after high school to the army.

We didn't see him for a while, then one Christmas he came back. Something had happened to Samuel. He was different. He had lost maybe 30 pounds; his chest had expanded – I guess it was all those pushups. He wore his uniform and he stood proudly with his head up and looked people in the eye. Something had happened to Samuel.

He had been changed by this community which he was now a part of, and it is a community of discipline, structure, and it helped to form Samuel.

Some of you may be familiar with KIPP charter schools which is a strong culture organization. They say their job with children and teens is 51% character and 49% academics. So if you decide to be a teacher and teach at KIPP the first thing they do is take you through an orientation and training in which they say that you will get “KIPP-notized”. They say that they have a culture of hard work and respect and they teach that to the children and expect it from the teachers. There are posters all over the walls with different character traits. They might say, “No shortcuts!” It’s a culture of industry and respect, that’s what that community is about.

I wonder what the community of Jesus is about. If your kids, when they’re in junior or senior high school sign up for the Pure Sound youth choir, they will find themselves in a community of affirmation. So if you are a parent of a Pure Sound young person, or if you’re in the group, there is clearly an expectation in the community that you hoot and holler and cheer for those who are performing in any situation. We believe that these children have gifts within them, and we want them to be unfolded. We want them to unwrap their gifts and we’re going to cheer. It’s a community of affirmation.

So what is the community of Jesus about? That’s what today’s passage is about. It’s about what the community of Jesus is to be about. It’s Paul writing to a church – not to an individual, not to a bunch of individuals in a church but to the church itself, and it says what that community is supposed to be like. He says, “...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Forgive one another, bear with one another. And above all, put on love.” There’s a strand that runs all through that that shows up over and over.

I’ll start with verse 15: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ...with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” “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.” Over and over and over.

The community of Jesus is a community of love, of kindness, compassion, meekness, humility, patience, forgiveness... and gratitude. A community of gratitude.

That’s what I want us to talk about today.

I want to do a brief review quickly. This is the third in the series of sermons, and in the first one we talked about just the impact of gratitude, that it changes everything. When you live out of gratitude, everything’s different. We talked about the objects of gratitude, that we’re thanking

one another, but even as we do that, we're thanking God. So the objects of gratitude are both God and one another.

Then we talked about how to cultivate gratitude and we do that by practicing thanksgiving. We practice thanksgiving that cultivates gratitude that leads to more thanksgiving, and we'll talk more about that in a few moments.

Then a number of weeks ago in our second sermon we talked about "Hard Times Gratitude." How do you give thanks in really difficult times? We said first you have to be willing to feel the burn, to feel the pain. Being thankful in hard times doesn't mean you don't hurt. Then second, you realize that everything is a gift. Third, you look for things that are thanks-worthy. In the interview in the paper with the mayor of Dayton, she said "This is such a horrible thing that's happened. We're so grateful to the police officers who kept this from being so much worse." She looked for that which is worthy of thanks even in a bad situation.

Finally, we have to claim *the yet*, that is the laments, the laments of the Psalms that say "The waters are coming over my head. My enemies are triumphing over me" ... and then they say "Yet... will I trust you." "Yet will I turn to you, God." And "Yet will I praise you."

So that's what we talked about with hard times gratitude. Let's talk today about a community of gratitude and three things I want to say. The first is that we are shaped by the communities of which we are part - by the people around us. Second, gratitude or thanksgiving is to pervade everything we do. And finally, we have to be intentional about cultivating that gratitude. It doesn't come naturally.

First, we're shaped by the communities of which we're a part. I want you to listen to our passage, starting at verse 16:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." and I'm going to read it in Texan. "Let the word of Christ dwell in *y'all* richly. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and with gratitude in *y'all's* hearts sing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."

I want you to see that this whole letter is in second personal plural imperative. In other words, he's not just saying to each one of us, he's saying "Let the word of Christ live among us..." Let it be part of who *we are* as a community, that the world would know who we are a grateful people. We are shaped by the communities of which we're a part.

He says, "Let the word of Christ ...to which you were called *in one body*." That means all of you together. He says, "Sing songs, hymns and spiritual songs to God." Well, what's the point of that? That's what we do together. That's what binds us together in gratitude. We're shaped by these communities.

Diana Butler Bass wrote a book on gratitude recently called *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*. In it she tells the story of a pastor named Jason. He was fairly new in his church when he was diagnosed with cancer. He went through a year of chemotherapy and radiation therapy and all of the treatments, and this congregation just wrapped themselves around him and his family. They brought meals, drove him back and forth to treatments. They took care of his kids and all of these different things.

After all the months of treatment he's finally able to be back in the pulpit again and preach, and he says to his congregation, "You know I don't like receiving your help. I like to be the *helper*, I don't like to be the *helpee*. I don't like to be in someone's debt. But this whole thing has changed it all for me. It's not about a transaction where I do this for you, and you pay me back somehow – like there's a debt. We're in this together."

Listen to what Pastor Jason says: "It was kind of you to share my nightmare. It was kind of you to share my pain and suffering. It was kind of you to share Allie's worry [his wife]. And my boys' fears and anxieties. It was kind of you to make my cancer our cancer, yours too. Thank you for being with me."

Dr. Butler Bass reflects on it this way: "Gratitude is social. It's about being with one another in life together. It's the thread of nature and neighbor, the seemingly fragile strands of gifts and goodness that weave our lives together." We are to be a community held together by our common gratitude for one another, and for God's presence. We are shaped by that. When we baptize children, we pray that we would shape those children in this congregation, that they would see how we live and would learn from that who Jesus is.

Here's the second thing. Gratitude is to be a part of everything. It flavors everything. It's part of it. Listen again to the Scripture: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

This means that it's our actions, not just our words. Sometimes what we do is we encapsulate thanksgiving. I'm going to use what sometimes our children would do because maybe we can see ourselves in that. It's Christmas time and they're saying, "Oh, I want more, more and more!" So we say to them, "Make sure you say thank you." So they say, "More, more, more!" and we say, "thank you." As long as they say thank you, we put it in this little box, these words that we say. But our lives, our desires, everything that we're doing gives this sense of entitlement, of envy and jealousy, and of discontent. All of that is there, all of our actions where we think, "Well, I'll always say thank you." I'm not saying we shouldn't say thank you, of course we should. It's in word and in deed.

John F. Kennedy says this: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them."

I once did a children's sermon. I sat down on the steps and I had a bowl of M&Ms. I asked all the kids to come forward. I ate the M&Ms and I said, "I am so grateful for these M&Ms! These are just so good – they're delicious M&Ms! Thank you, God, for these M&Ms, thank you so much!"

Poor kids – I did that for quite a while. I even had the peanut kind and I'd suck the chocolate off and chew. After a while I said, "Do you think I'm really grateful?" And they didn't know quite how to answer that. I said, "Well if I were really grateful what would I do with these M&Ms?" They knew what to answer there! I'd share them and of course I gave them each an M&M. (I didn't want to, but I did.)

So look, that's so obvious. If you're really going to say that you're grateful, then act like it. Live like it. I don't know how many of you follow that situation where I think it was the Judiciary Committee didn't show up for the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund hearings. There were two of them there and the whole place was filled with firefighters and those who had been a part of the 9/11 first responders. They were asking, "Are you really thankful? If you're really thankful then we have to approve and appropriate this fund. Because you said you were going to be thankful and we'll never forget you. We're so grateful for you." Well, put your money where your mouth is. That's just an illustration of real gratitude being what we do.

The second thing is that it's not just word and deed, but that it flavors everything. "Whatever you do do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

My daughter, when we went on vacation, said she'd bring a snack called "trash." I don't know if any of you do that where you get a trash bag and you put some Chex cereal and other things in it, along with chocolate. Cinnamon I think, and sugar. You shake it all up in the trash bag and then you just eat it. It's a great snack, so she brought it along.

But the problem was that the trash bag she put it in was lavender scented. And man, that was some nasty trash! You'd eat that and really groan. It was awful! It's like when you have gratitude and you could taste it in everything you do.

I don't usually use props, I'm getting out on a limb this time because I'm going to do it today. When I was in college this was my favorite sweatshirt. It was new in college and I don't know why I liked it so much. I think it was my favorite because it didn't have anything on the front of it and that was sort of counter cultural. And also because it was cheap. You know, it's still shrinking every year. Must have been cheap cotton. Just keeps shrinking every single year, so I still keep it and squeeze into it sort of every once in a while.

When I was in college, I was really cheap, and you don't want to waste quarters. So when you wash things, even your brand-new red sweatshirt, you just throw it in with everything else. Why would you waste quarters? And if you're washing white clothes with it whites are supposed to be washed in hot water. So you then have your undershirt – isn't that a lovely pink undershirt? It colors everything. Oh, yes, you have your athletic socks.

Now this was before pink became the color of choice to represent the fight against breast cancer. And every young man needs a nice white shirt or maybe pink to wear to church. To tell the truth this was a recreation. I didn't save these things except for the red sweatshirt. It's that when you wash things with gratitude, everything gets colored by it. When we go to work, we go grateful that we have a job. When it rains, we're grateful for the rain. When it floods, we're grateful for the people who come to help us in the flood. When we have an argument with our spouse, we're grateful that we have the kind of relationship that can work though conflict.

In every situation we're grateful to God for the gift of life that God gave us. The gift of eternal life that God gave us. That colors everything that we do. "Whatever you do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Now here's the last thing that I think it says. It begins with these words: "So holy and beloved children of God clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Clothe yourselves. Later, "above all, clothe yourselves with love."

Now here's what's interesting. This is not a typical image that Paul uses. He usually talks about things that change you from the inside out, not from the outside in. But the whole passage, even the part right above this, talks about it. There it says, "Strip off the old self with its old practices and ways, with its words of envy and jealousy and harmful words and quarrels. Strip off the old self and clothe yourself with the new self."

It's an intentional decision. You have to do it every single day, just like you get dressed. Every single day. This passage is one that we use often in weddings and it's perfect for weddings. That's because this couple is standing before you and you know that the life that's ahead for them may be good or it may have hard times and will have all sorts of challenges. They're going to be mad at each other sometimes. But every day you get up and decide how you're going to treat one another. With "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, and forbearance and forgiveness and love."

So every day we put on gratitude. It's an intentional decision. So how do we do that? We've invited you to write thank you notes every single day. Some of you have done that well all year long. I've received a number of them. Just use the little cards if you want to. I did it for a while, fell off the wagon, got back on and did it for a while, fell off the wagon and then got back on. I started about a week ago so I could tell you I was doing it. But it is this practice, this discipline of practicing these things, to be intentional about putting on gratitude.

Second, come to church. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but you have to come to church on a regular basis. That's because what we do here is to thank God for who God is and what God does. That's why we've come. Not to hear something. Not to receive something. Yes, that, too, but the essence of worship is thanking God. It's offering ourselves to God in response to what God has done for us. Worship is a verb.

Third, tithe. So if we are really going to practice gratitude, we're going to do it with our lives. We're going to do it with our money.

Now you may say that I'm just trying to get money for the church. Look, if that pops into your mind then do it somewhere else. The Bush School of Business and Government and Public Service at Texas A&M says there are 97,807 tax-exempt nonprofit organizations in Texas. 97,807. Surely there's one of them that will touch your heart in some way so that you might give in gratitude for what God has done for you. It's just a practice.

Write a gratitude journal every day. Here are the things I'm grateful for, God. For a while I had a note card I carried in my pocket and I'd get it out and every day I'd write ten of them on there. I'd get it out and look at it. You've got to be intentional.

Begin every prayer, every one of your daily prayers. Be sure you begin with gratitude and thanksgiving, and not just a single line like, "It is with a grateful heart O God that we come to you..." And then you launch into all the stuff you want. Spend time focusing on gratitude and then you can move into confession and intercession and supplication – things you ask God to be with you for. It's just these practices. You may have some others you can share.

It's just so natural – and I'm not sure that's even the right word – the world continually draws us back into complaint, into criticism of others, to a sense of entitlement. That's what draws us in all the time.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says this, "In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."

We hardly even realize it. But it is the essence of all that needs to color everything. You only have so many minutes, so many hours in your life. And do you want to spend them criticizing other people, complaining about life, expressing what you think you deserve? Or do you want to live out of a place of gratitude and practice it on a daily basis? We come together to challenge one another to live that way. To step into a place where you can feel the gratitude for God in all that we do.

Let me close with this. Do you remember when the Astros won the World Series? Oh – that was fun! It's going to be fun in October this year too when we win the World Series! Go buy yourself a mattress at Mattress Mack's. That's what you need to do. It's going to happen – I just believe it.



When the Cubs won the World Series it was incredible in Chicago. I don't know if you saw the reports but the whole city had just a huge celebration. The Washington Post reported on it: "The Cubs players and staff have grown accustomed to a strange phenomenon. Everywhere they go people come up to them with stories of a late father, grandfather, a mother, a grandmother, or brother or sister who was the biggest Cub fan of all time. The World Series title would have meant so much for them. Almost uniformly interaction ends with two words. 'Thank you.'

"It's a lot of gratitude," says Cubs manager Joe Madden. "It's the same refrain from everybody. For the most part they don't want an autograph, or a picture, they just want to shake your hand and say, Thank you."

Look, that's who we are to be as a community. We are just the people who say, "Thank you." Who in everything we do thank God for the gift of life, for the gift of God's presence in the midst of our lives. For the gift of eternal life, of our salvation. A community of thanksgiving.

*Gracious God, we confess that too often we are drawn into that old self that's full of anger, bitterness and a sense of entitlement, of complaint. Forgive us, God, and awaken within us that sense of gratitude for even life itself, for the ability to take a breath every morning and for the gift of that abundant life, life in you that even death can't conquer. God, help us to be that community of gratitude, the people who just say thank you. In the name of Christ. Amen.*