

## **Gratitude Revisited**

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Psalm 100

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.*

*Worship the LORD with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the LORD is God.*

*It is he that made us, and we are his,  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.*

*Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the LORD is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Psalm 100 (NRSV)

Join with me in prayer. *God, we believe you have something for every one of us, and us as a congregation today so open us up that we might receive it. Open our eyes that we might see things anew, and our ears that we might hear your words in the midst of these words. Open our hearts, God, renew our compassion, and then, O God, open our hands that we might respond and serve. Amen.*

When one of my daughters was two years old, she wanted to help around the house so she would help unload the dishwasher. She'd take a plate and hand it to my wife and my wife would say, "Thank you!" So after a while she began to believe that's what you say just when a dish is handed over. She thought it was just about a dish.

She would say, "Achoo!" and then would say, "Thank you!" She was maybe twelve when she realized that "Achoo!" meant something like a sneeze. We did that very simply just to train her in the practice of thanksgiving, of gratitude.

We've been looking at that all year long and one of the things I've learned as I've tried to write these thank-you notes is that I need to learn to be more thankful. It's a funny thing that the more you practice it the more you realize that you're lacking in it. The more you practice it the more you realize that it needs to be more a part of your life, more core in who you are.

Let's look back and review what we've talked about over this year very briefly. At first, we began by talking about the impact that gratitude has on our lives and how it makes an impact on our health, our happiness, our relationships, and our spiritual lives. That gratitude underlies all those things. That practicing gratitude is a life changing habit.

We talked then that that habit has a cycle that as you practice thanksgiving, it creates a sense of gratitude in your heart and as you feel that gratitude you practice more thanksgiving and as you practice more thanksgiving you feel more gratitude. The gratitude - thanksgiving cycle.

In our second message we looked together at the prophet Habakkuk who said that "even when there is no crop in the field, even when things are terrible, we will praise and thank God." The idea is how do you practice gratitude in hard times?

We talked together about how to mine out things that are thanks worthy even in difficult times. There are things to be thankful for and you look for them. Then you turn to what the Psalmist calls the "Yet..." So all of the laments in the Psalms, the hard time songs, cry out to God in their pain and anguish and then say, - there's a fulcrum there - they say, "*Yet I will praise you. Yet I will thank you. Yet I will trust you.*" So even in our pain we look to turn on the "yet."

In our third week we talked about our community of thanksgiving, how thanksgiving becomes a part not just of each one of us individually, but a part of a culture. That you have some cultures where there is whining and griping; people get together and just whine and gripe.

The contrast is that churches are cultures of gratitude. That we come together and exhort one another, encourage one another, build one another up. We develop gratitude with one another together, and that the church is a community of gratitude. When we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion the central prayer is called "The Great Thanksgiving." The meal itself is called the Eucharist which comes from a word that means "Thank you." So the church is a community of gratitude.

I want to move out of that and take the next step to talk about that if we want to be a community of gratitude then what is the central act of gratitude for the church, for the believer? The central act of gratitude is worship. It is praise and worship.

So what I want to do is look at this Psalm. This is the 100th Psalm and many of you know how it goes - "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth." I want to look at that and see what the Psalmist can teach us.

Let's look at this first verse: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth."

The first thing it says is that you're supposed to express your praise. Praise doesn't just lie within you, you express it. You make a noise. You sing a song. Now how do you practice your praise? Perhaps you come to church. You know, I'm preaching to the choir here. You're here. You've come to church, so I hope you're here - at least part of why you're here is to praise God, to thank God for what God's done for you.

Maybe in your prayers at home you thank God. At least that's part of praising, thanking God. Part of your prayer along with praying for other people, praying for yourself and confessing your sin is that you praise and thank God.

But when I read this, it's in the imperative mood. For those of you that remember our high school English class, the imperative mood means it's a command. And listen to all these commands here. "*Make* a joyful noise... *worship* the Lord. *Come* into his presence with singing. *Know* the Lord is God. *Enter* his gate with thanksgiving. *Give* thanks to him. *Bless* his name."

You can feel an enthusiasm there that I think sometimes we fall short of, that sometimes our praise is perfunctory, or casual, or understated. Maybe that's because we've lost our sense of awe and wonder about what God does and who God is.

Anne Lamott wrote a class book called *The Three Essential Prayers* and it became a number one best seller. And there she says that there are three essential prayers - help, thanks, and wow! Wow!

I heard someone say recently that each one of us has a "wow" threshold. I love this image. It seems that for some of us our "wow threshold" is very low, and we go through days just being full of "Wow!" "Wow! Did you hear that song? Did you hear that anthem? Wow - did you taste that steak? Wow - did you see that painting? Wow - did you see that sunset? Wow - what a beautiful day!"

And others of us maybe get jaded and cynical and beaten down and it takes a lot for us to say "Wow!" Like you have to see the Grand Canyon before you're going to say "Wow!" Just seeing your everyday stuff just doesn't get you there.

What would it be like if we could just lower our "wow threshold"? And awaken within us a sense of awe and wonder at what God does and who God is, and out of that would grow our praise.

C.S. Lewis has a great concept. He says that experiencing something amazing and wonderful is not complete unless you express your praise for it. Let me read the specifics and this is exactly what he says, he's such a good writer. He puts it this way: "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is the appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are. The delight is incomplete until it's expressed. The Scottish catechism says that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. But we shall know then that these are the same thing, fully to enjoy is to glorify. And in commanding him to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him."

If we really want to experience the presence of God, we need to fully experience God's gifts and blessings and presence, we have to express it.

Now we all express in different ways. Every culture has a different way; each person has a different way of expressing that praise. If you go to a hockey game, they cheer one way. They bang on the glass, shout curse words, wave their arms, and all of that sort of a thing. But if you go to a tennis match, they applaud very delicately.

When it comes to churches, there are some that are more like hockey games, though I don't know that there are curse words. They're more like hockey games - they jump over pews, wave their hands, and that's a wonderful way of expressing. Then there are churches that are more like tennis matches and I must say we're probably more on that end. So do we have to be? I'm not telling you that we need to do any pew jumping or hand waving or "Amen" shouting. Although I will say that after an amazing anthem once we heard a small child in the back say "wow!" I thought - now that's worship, right there. *That's* worship.

But it is the case that when we come to worship, we can fully engage. So at the risk of not twisting the knife here, sometimes we see people when we're singing the hymns that aren't singing. I understand that, for some singing is difficult and also, singing may just not be your thing. Or maybe you don't know the tune or the song or the words. So I want to encourage you that if that's where you are... first, I'd love it if you'd try to sing, but if not, then open the hymnal and read the words, so you engage in the experience.

That's because the hymns are the way we learn theology. I could ask you to quote to me ten Bible verses, and many of you would struggle. But I could ask for you to quote ten lines from a hymn and you could do that, because the hymns build our internal theology - that's how we're taught.

When we pray, are you really praying? Or are you closing your eyes politely? When we do the baptism, we pray for the child. Are you really praying? Are you really praying for Asher and Reagan today? To think about how they're going to grow and how we can really shape them? How can we lean into worship so that we fully put ourselves in so it's not a passive attitude of saying, "I'm going to come and just receive something?" Worship is something that we do.

Now it may not be that that's the only way we worship of course, that the only way we praise - all sorts of different ways of expressing.

I have been interested in this project that is going on. It's run by Andrew Carroll who's the director of the Center for American War Letters at Chapman University. I heard about it on the radio. As all these World War II veterans have been passing away and their children have their letters, they don't know what to do with them. They're worried about giving them to their own children since who knows what they'll do with them, so they give them to this Center for American War Letters. They're cataloged and preserved and documented. You can go online and look at the photos of them. They're powerful. One of them was written on the back of a label that's torn off a rationed can of peaches. It's torn off and they used the label to write a letter.

Listen to this letter from Harry McDonald to Jacqueline Robinson on March 14, 1944 from the front in Southern Italy. "Remember our last evening under the guiding influence of the willow tree? What a hopeless case I was then. What an opportunity I missed. I think I did manage to blurt out 'I love you!' in some uncertain terms. Time has changed that uncertainty into the most definite thing I know. I'm the luckiest man alive."

I can just close my eyes and imagine him writing it and her receiving it.

What if you wrote a love letter to God? What if you said, "You know what? I'm not much for public displays of emotion but I can put a pencil to paper and express to God my love, my gratitude, my praise." To express to God all that God has done. Your gratitude. Its life changing.

Now the second verse is so interesting. It's really the translations that I find most interesting in this one. It says, "Worship the Lord with gladness, come into his presence with singing." What's interesting is that the Hebrew word *abod* is used for worship. And if you looked up the

word in a Hebrew dictionary it says it means, "to work" or "to serve." Some of the old translations as well as the New American Standard, which is the best literal translation, says "Serve the Lord with gladness." See, worship isn't just what we do and hear. It's our whole lives offered to God as an expression of our praise and gratitude.

There's a church not far from here when they have a meeting, like a trustees' or a finance committee meeting; any meeting of the church they light a candle in the middle of the table. Then say, "All of our work is what we call worshipful work. This is what we do for God. This is our offering. Our work is our praise." See, everything we do in life is to be an offering to God, an expression of our praise.

This Christmas season you'll hear the sentimental song that we have loved - and it's the "Little Drummer Boy." The lines go like this: "I am a poor boy, too. I have no gift to bring that's fit to give a king. Shall I play for you on my drum?" He's a drummer boy so the praise he has to offer is to play his drum. I'm a preacher so the praise I have to offer is preaching. If you're an accountant, perhaps the praise you have to offer is accounting. Every daily task we do is to be offered to God as praise and worship. We "serve the Lord with gladness" as part of our worship. We have worshipful work.

There was a trend a number of years ago where when you walked in there was a sign somewhere that said, "Enter to worship" and when you walked out, there was another sign that said, "Depart to serve."

There's a church in Tennessee that had a sign over the back of the sanctuary door that said, "Now the real worship begins."

So, we come in here for an hour to rehearse, to practice thanking and praising God and then we go do it with everything we do. Let me be clear - it says "serve the Lord with *gladness*..." Not out of obligation, but with *gladness*.

When we pass the offering plate and you put in a dollar or whatever you put in, God is more interested not so much in the number on the check - the number of zeros - as God is interested in the spirit with which it's given. Is it given out of gratitude and generosity and praise, or given out of obligation? Is it given in a perfunctory way, where you might think "It's what I gotta do?"

The same is true with life, with everything we do for God. Do it with gladness.

The first two verses tell us that we are to express our praise, we express it, we say it, we live it. But then there's this really interesting thing about this. It says, "Know that the Lord is God and it is he that made us. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture."

At Thanksgiving there's a tradition a lot of people follow and many of you will do it this Thursday: go around the table and everyone say what they're thankful for. You want to be first because after family and nation and church and food, if you're maybe the 20th person then you have nothing left to say you're thankful for! Everyone's already said everything.

But what's interesting about this Psalm, which isn't true about every Psalm, is that there's no thanksgiving for the way God has blessed them. No thanksgiving for what God has done. In some of the Psalms they say, "You have rescued me from the pit," or "you have guided us through danger," or "You have led me through my life." But here is none of that. The thanksgiving is very simply that we praise God because we belong to him.

If you were an Orthodox Jewish male who was devout, then every morning when you get up and you would say this prayer: "Blessed are you, Lord, Our God, Ruler of the universe, who has not made me a gentile, a slave or a woman." I didn't say it - they said it!

Now look, the rabbis have spent a lot of time reflecting on this and what it really means. And before you throw too many stones, we kind of do this. "There but for the grace of God, go I" when we see someone in trouble. What we're saying is "Thank you, God, that I'm not them." "Thank you, God, that I'm not that person in trouble." If we see someone who's homeless, we may say, "Thank you, God for my shelter." What we're saying underneath that is "Thank you, God that I'm not homeless like that guy there."

When we say, "Thank you God, for my freedom" we're saying, "Thank you, God that you have not made me a slave."

See, the question is, would you say "thank you" if you were homeless, if you were a slave?

We say, "Thank you, God for my health," and we're saying, "Thank you God, that I'm not sick." But would you say "thank you" if you *were* sick?

See, here praise, the essence of praise, is that it is irrespective of circumstance. The main thing we praise God for is not all our blessings; the main thing we praise God for is God himself, that God has claimed us, that we are his.

When I was in youth ministry, we used to sing a song based on the Song of Solomon. That's a section of Scripture that's a love song between two lovers. It is used as a metaphor also for the relationship between us and God. In the Song of Solomon it says, "I am his and he is mine, his banner over us is love." "As long as I have you, God, that's enough. That's all I need. My identity is that I belong to you."

When that is how you praise or worship everything else is gravy. The most important thing is that we have God - "I am his and he is mine."

One more verse I want us to understand before we quit. "For the Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever, his faithfulness to all generations." We're praising God for his goodness.

When I was in seminary, I did my internship - we have interns here, Madison is our intern at our church now. I did it in Duncanville, Texas and there was an associate pastor there named Jerry Ott. Jerry took me around to show me how to do hospital visits. That was cool - I loved learning from him.

We went in to see a man who had a terminal illness. The doctors had shared with him that he would ultimately die from this disease. Jerry did a good job with him and after they talked sort of on the surface a while, Jerry said, "I've heard about your prognosis and I just wonder if you're scared." The man said, "Yes, I am scared. I'm scared because I haven't been a very good person."

Jerry's response was so perfect, and I've used it myself since then. He said, "It's not about how good you've been it's about how good God is." We are not afraid; we are confident not because of our goodness but because of God's goodness. That's worth giving praise for, that's worth "Wow!"

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, died in 2011. It's interesting that during his life after he'd started the Apple company, he found a biological sister he didn't know he had. They sort of reunited. She spoke at his memorial service at Stanford Chapel and she told this story: "At the very end, as his breathing became labored as he was lying in bed, his family was gathered around him. He looked at me, and he looked at his children, and he looked at his wife. And he spoke one last time and he said, "Oh, wow! Oh, wow! Oh, wow!" Then he died.

Now perhaps he is saying "Oh, wow!" because it dawned upon him how amazing it was that he had his family around him and how wonderful they were. Or perhaps he could see something no one else in that room could see at that moment. But at that moment in his life he had

recovered a sense of awe and wonder. I suspect that we should too and awaken within us our praise for a God who holds us in his hand and who is very, very good.

Let's pray. *Gracious God, we are so thankful for how you've blessed us. We come into this season to thank you for those blessings of course and we confess that sometimes our sense of awe has just fallen short. That our "awe threshold" and our "wow threshold" is just too high. Help us to see the amazing world you have given us and to respond with all of our praise. And, God, when it's hard for us to see those things around us, remind us that the best gift you've given us is the gift of yourself. That you hold us in your hand, that you are so good. Thank you. We praise you. Amen.*