

More Than a List
Colossians 3:12-17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 20, 2022
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I remember some years ago - really decades ago now - when a certain gratitude journal was published and became quite popular. I can't actually recall the name of it or who published it, although I did have a copy, but what I do remember is that it invited people into a really simple practice. It asked people to write down five things at the end of each day for which they were grateful.

While this may seem commonplace at this point, after all the idea gathered momentum and has become quite common, but that particular journal was the first time I was introduced to this practice.

And if you, like me, have ever tried this, you know that some days this practice can be very engaging, and other days it can feel mundane or even difficult. After all, when my week's happenings had been pretty routine, I would find myself wondering how many times I could write that I was grateful for food or shelter or friends without feeling like I was cheating on an assignment.

But when my week had been filled with surprising bits of joy and new insights, or with tastes and sights and textures that stopped me in my tracks...at those times I not only appreciated this practice, but I realized how good it was to take a minute of intentional gratitude...to write those things down...even to have that list to look back on when those days came around on which gratitude was a more difficult practice.

What I, like many others, came to discover is that this was a good and important practice. This was true not only because it gave me a daily pause in those few minutes before bed, but it was a good and important practice because that simple act of gratitude wasn't really just about those few minutes. It wasn't just about the five things I had listed. Rather it was a practice that rooted me in gratitude and that began to shape me to be more aware and more grateful in all moments of my life.

In other words, it was about far more than just a list.

Gratitude at its fullest *is* a regular practice - not something we do once in a while - but a regular practice *and* it is about far more than the practice itself. At its fullest, it leads us to live from a new position.

Gratitude drives us toward the things of God. It acknowledges what we have been given and what others have given us. And it changes us. After all, as someone said in Bible study the other day, it is difficult to be hateful and grateful at the same time.

This is why I think of gratitude as more than a list...more than thank you notes - which you all know, I love to write...more than a practice. This is why I think of gratitude as a position from which we live, as a place we are invited to be rooted.

And when we are rooted there, we will find ourselves changed.

The reality is that when we live from a place of gratitude, it changes who we are and it changes what we see. Just this last week I saw a friend's post on Facebook that said, "Gratitude helps us see what is there instead of what isn't."

And don't we all need a little more of that? After all, it is too easy to name what is lacking, what isn't good enough, or simply what isn't enough. It is too easy to be always striving for something else, always going for the grass that is greener on the other side of the proverbial fence, rather than to sit in the truth of what we have, what is already around us.

So what would happen if we positioned ourselves in such a way that we were aware of what we had...of what it meant to have and to be enough...of all the gifts that surround us?

Another way to say this is that gratitude helps us live from a position of abundance rather than scarcity. When we are grateful, when we recognize and honor what we have, then we are also more likely to live generously. And, as a general rule generous living is grateful living.

When I am grateful for the roof over my head and the food in my refrigerator and the safety I enjoy at home, then it is easier for me to share from my abundance with those whose experiences are different from mine.

And, this thing about abundance and scarcity, it reaches much further than our pocketbooks. When I know what it is to be loved, it is easier to share love with others. When I know what it is to be offered forgiveness, then forgiveness comes more easily. The list of examples could go on, but all of these are about living from a place of abundance, of knowing that I have not only enough for my life, but a little more to share.

The scripture we heard today from the book we know as Colossians is an excerpt from a letter written to the church at Colossae in the first century. The church was experiencing some struggles...there was some conflict about beliefs and priorities and behaviors...they were trying to figure out what it meant to be followers of Jesus in their context and the writer was trying to keep them focused on the right things.

The section from which Dale read today focuses on the practical application of faith. Just before these verses, the author pointed to some ways *not* to be. In verse 8 we read *Get rid of all such things - anger, wrath, malice* (Colossians 3:8, NRSV) and the list goes on. But those "do not's" lead into these verses we heard today...verses that encouraged them to be the best that were created to be. And this list might feel familiar to us - things like kindness, compassion, humility, meekness, patience, and love.

But what I never want us to read past is the way gratitude keeps showing up here. We hear "And be thankful." We hear, "With gratitude in your hearts..." We hear, "Whatever you do...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God..."

When we are rooted in gratitude, all of those things earlier in this passage become more manageable. We become more able to be kind and compassionate, humble and patient.

When we are rooted in gratitude, we discover ways, not to ignore the hard times, but to hold them in balance with the gifts in our lives.

When we are rooted in gratitude, we come to see the many blessings that are right here in the midst of our wonderful, messy lives.

Just last Sunday I was at the synagogue for a yoga class. The person leading it said that in Judaism you are to say blessings 100 times a day. There are blessings for every moment - for waking, for eating, for working, for playing, for resting - for everything.

What if our lives became reflections of our gratitude? What if each breath that we took was a thank you to God for this life that we have? What if we didn't wait for the big moments or extraordinary gifts, but found a way to live in gratitude for the simple, the mundane, the ordinary?

There is a song by Carrie Newcomer called, "Holy As A Day Is Spent." I want to you to hear the lyrics and to wonder with me what would happen if gratitude was more than a simple list, if it was really a way that we lived, a way that led us to see the holy in it all.

*Holy is the dish and drain
The soap and sink and the cup and plate
Warm wool socks and the cold white tile
Shower heads and good dry towels
And frying eggs sound like psalms
With bits of salt measured in my palm
It's all a part of a sacrament
As holy as a day is spent*

*Holy is the busy street
The cars that boom with passion's beat
And the check-out girl counting change
And the hands that shook my hands today
And hymns of geese fly overhead
And spread their wings like their parents did
Blessed be the dog that runs in her sleep
To chase some wild and elusive thing*

*Holy is the familiar room
And quiet moments in the afternoon
And folding sheets like folding hands
To pray as only laundry can
I'm letting go of all my fear
Like autumn leaves made of earth and air
For the summer came and the summer went
As holy as a day is spent*

*Holy is the place I stand
To give whatever small good I can
And the empty page and the open book
Redemption everywhere I look
Unknowingly we slow our pace
In the shade of unexpected grace
And with grateful smiles and sad lament
As holy as a day is spent
And morning light sings providence*

As holy as a day is spent¹

Amen.

¹ "Holy As A Day Is Spent" lyrics by Carrie Newcomer, from album *The Gathering of Spirits*,