

Are We Thankful?  
Psalm 100  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
November 18, 2018  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I am sure that I am not the only one who is still marveling that we are already in the last half of November. While recognizing that Thanksgiving is early this year, still it is hard for me to believe that we are almost there.

And yet, I am always glad when Thanksgiving comes along because we all need some intentional pauses to stop and reflect on our gratitude. Especially in a world that seems ever more polarized. Especially when we have so many messages of fear and division coming at us. Especially in times of personal loss as we have said goodbye to so many friends and loved ones – for this community, two more in just the last 9 days. While we know that we have much to be thankful for, sometimes the other stuff overwhelms us and so we need moments like this to stop and simply be reminded to sit in gratitude.

So, I'm going to invite us to take a minute out right now and to name some things we are thankful for. (And yes, this really is congregation participation part of the sermon – I am actually asking you to respond!) For what are you thankful?

There are so many things. We could make a list a mile long and even that reality is worth being grateful for. From family and friends to health...from freedoms to financial stability...from rewarding work to a good education...and we could add in the simple things like the taste of ice cream or a warm blanket on a cold night, the smile of a child or a hug at just the right moment, a favorite song coming on the radio or a close parking spot when we're in a hurry. Truly – our list is long.

And it is important to stay in touch with gratitude. After all, the things that make us sad or frustrate us or simply make us angry are also real. And they can feel overwhelming. In fact, I've heard that studies show that when anger and fear are evoked, the impact on the brain is more powerful than when joy and gratitude are experienced. So, while I wish this wasn't true, what it says to me again and again is that it is so important that we be rooted in gratitude, that gratitude be the place, the position, from which we live our lives. After all, if we root ourselves there, then it is more likely to be our response even in hard times.

When I first moved to Joplin, MO I lived in a duplex and shared a wall with an elderly lady named Billie. It was frequent that conversations with Billie would turn to remembering her husband who had died in the year before I met her. She would talk about Bill, the life they shared, the decades of marriage they celebrated. And inevitably a tear would slide down her cheek. Then, Billie would apologize for crying. She would go on and say how she really shouldn't be sad, after all they had so many good years together and she had so much to be thankful for. And I would remind her that that was exactly why she was crying. She was crying because he mattered and because life with him was good. Yes, she was crying because she missed him, but mostly she was crying because she had rooted her life so deeply in gratitude that she knew what a wonderful gift she had received.

I feel certain it is no mistake that the book of Psalms is so full of gratitude. After all if we remember that Psalms is the ancient worship book, the hymnal of the ancient people, then wouldn't we expect gratitude to overflow?

So, let's hear this again and see what we can glean as we root ourselves ever more deeply in gratitude: *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.*<sup>1</sup>

This is a very familiar psalm of thanksgiving. But what do you hear there? Perhaps as we work to root ourselves in gratitude there are several things we should note.

In the opening sentence we hear, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.” Just in those first few words we hear so much. Make a joyful noise – in other words, this isn’t to be kept to ourselves. Gratitude doesn’t have to be a quiet and private thing but is worth sharing. And that sentence ends, “all the earth.” In other words, it’s not just about us – we aren’t the only ones who are celebrating with gratitude. This is about all creation and, perhaps most important for us to remember, all people – not just those who look like us or think like us or come from the same place as us, not just our tribe or those from our culture, but all people together with all creation are called to make a joyful noise.

And where does this joy and this gratitude come from? It comes from God and our rootedness in God. Look at verse 3. “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.” This is so important to remember. While we know – when we are asked – that the right answer is that God is the creator and we are the created, we are often more likely to live as if we are self-made people, as if everything we have is because we have pulled ourselves up by our proverbial bootstraps. And all too often we live as if God is created in our image – having our same preferences and even bigotries.

But this psalm reminds us that God is the source of everything and everyone that exists, and that includes us. This text reminds us that our identity is about more than who we are as

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 100, NRSV.

individuals, it is about *whose* we are as children of God. And when we really realize this, when we know it in our core, when we are rooted *first* in our identity as children of God, then we are more likely to live from and in gratitude. And when we live from that place it circles us back to the first statement – to the connectedness of all creation – because when we remember our rootedness in God then we also remember our connectedness to each other.

And this psalm of thanksgiving ends with a reminder of God’s goodness. Because that is also at the heart of our gratitude. If you hear one new thing from this psalm I hope it is this – God is good and faithful and God’s love is enduring. Our God never wills harm for you. Our God never stops loving you. Our God never abandons you or turns away from you. Our God loves with the purest and truest love that wills and works for good for all creation.

Yes, bad things happen, but they are not the intention or work of God. God does not rejoice in harming; God is not about punishing or casting out. Rather, in the midst of the realities of bad things and bad choices, God is faithful and present and loving. God is the light that helps us find our way back.

Is it any wonder that the psalmist writes, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name”<sup>2</sup>? After all, when we truly come to know the nature of God...when we stop trying to make God compatible to our worst actions....when we stop creating God in our own image...when we allow God to be God and allow ourselves to truly receive God’s love...then how can we enter God’s presence other than with praise and thanksgiving and sheer joy?

As children we learn to say, “thank you” but the gratitude, the thanksgiving our faith invites us into is something much larger. This isn’t two empty words, this isn’t the thank you

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 100:4, NRSV.

that is coerced out of us by our parents. This is something much larger, much more real, much deeper.

Are we grateful? Are we rooted in God so deeply that even in the face of pain gratitude is real? Are we ready to live lives that are shaped by that gratitude?

This week we will observe Thanksgiving. We will eat too much. We will spend time with family and friends. Many of us will watch some football. But in the midst of all that, what if we allowed ourselves to turn again toward God? What if we committed to live in such a way that not only do we know God's love but we share it? What if we chose to live from a place of gratitude? What difference might that make?

I want you to hear this psalm again, this time from Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message*:

On your feet now – applaud God!

Bring a gift of laughter,

Sing yourselves into his presence.

Know this: God is God, and God, God.

He made us; we didn't make him.

We're his people, his well-tended sheep.

Enter with the password: "Thank you!"

Make yourselves at home, talking praise.

Thank him. Worship him.

For God is sheer beauty,

All-generous in love,

Loyal always and ever.

How could we not be grateful? Amen.