



“We Hear God’s YES in Every Blessing”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Last Sunday was Consecration Sunday, the day we bring forward our pledge of financial support of the ministries of the church. Fear not---if you weren’t here last week, or forgot your pledge card, or are new and just weren’t sure what was happening--- there are still pledge cards in the pew racks and you may place yours in the box out in the narthex as you’re leaving worship this morning or pledge on-line at any time.

Last Sunday was a day to remind us of the importance of us all doing our part to support the ministries, the worship, the fellowship, the mission outreach that mean so much to us, and to Say YES to live generous lives and generous giving. Today is the day to say Thank You, thank you from the bottom of our hearts, to those so dear to us and most especially to our Creator God from whom all blessings flow. For we hear God’s YES in every blessing—YES my dear children whom I have created in love. YES my beautiful creation, bounteous and glorious. YES my church whom I fill with countless gifts of love that you might be my face, my heart in this world.

Some of you are old enough to remember a hymn sung in churches, or by children, or by parents as a lullaby. Written in 1897 by John Oatman, a Methodist preacher, it goes like this:

When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Refrain:

Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

Count your blessings, one by one. Count your blessings—your loved one, your friends, your neighbors, your church family. Count your opportunities, your resources, the ways each and every day we are blessed by acts of kindness and care. Count the air we breathe, the autumn leaves, the food we enjoy, the very ground we walk on, the Christ we serve. All are gifts from the heart of our generous God.

Let us count our blessings, hearing God’s YES in every one, and say thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

A couple weeks ago on Halloween night, David and I were surprised by one little trick-or-treater. We look forward to that night each year. David carves a magnificent jack-o-lantern and we eagerly await the first knocks at the door. They started early this year, before dark. Those are the littlest kids. Some clearly going trick-or-treating for their first time. Some had to be prompted by their parents standing just behind: “Say ‘trick or treat’.” I asked a couple older kids later if they wanted a trick, but nobody took me up on that. They were all there for the treats.

The surprise came from one little girl. Shy, happy with her treat. And then before she turned to leave she reached into her pocket and pulled out a little slip of paper and handed it to me. “Thank you,” it read. “Thank you,” with a little heart drawn on the side. I realized she’d prepared for the night with a whole pocket full of those little thank-you notes. And what a blessing she was, that tiny little girl, to our entire neighborhood that night. Reminding us all to say “thank you” all the time.

“Count your many blessings. Count them one by one. And it will surprise you, what the Lord has done.”

I’ve since thought often about that little girl and her pocket full of thank-you notes. What if we all were to do that for the next week or month or year or so? What if we kept a supply of thank-you notes in our pocket or our purse and handed them out through the day to folks who weren’t at all expecting such a response? What if we just gave one to...a helpful clerk at the store? An attentive teacher? In response to a colleague’s encouragement? What if we gave one to a listening friend? A helpful neighbor? A welcoming usher? A fellow walker who passes us by and offers a smile? What if we gave one to anyone who boosts our spirit, or to a patient family member who loves us even when we’re less than totally loveable?

Would we not be transformed, from the inside out, into people of deep gratitude and thanksgiving?

The 13th century German theological and mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said: “If the only prayer you ever pray is “Thank you!” that would be enough.

I invite you to think about that a bit during this Thanksgiving week. Many of us pray to God a lot. Some of us remember to pray when we or someone we love is in trouble. Some of us pray for our favorite football team. I’ve wondered how in the world God

stands it through these Fall weekends of back-to-back games, fervent prayers arising from both sides of the field for hours on end. Maybe God has earplugs, I don't know. I do know for sure that God is way more patient than I am.

But what might happen, in our own hearts, if just for a week or so, we were to hit the Pause button on all our prayers that are asking God to do something, to fix something, to change something. What if we simply trust that God knows all that already and is loving us through it all. What if we simply pray: "Thank you." And count our blessings, one by one.

Just to be clear on this. It's not that God needs our thank you's. God's fine and God loves us no matter what. I believe that God longs for our thank you's as a sign of God's love growing in us. God's YES to us echoing back in an eternal song of gratitude and praise.

You know, when I was growing up, my mother always made sure that I wrote thank-you notes after birthdays and Christmas. I see now that that was a kind of spiritual formation in me. It wasn't so much about the gift-giver, except for my aunt who lived out of state and wanted to be reassured that her gift had arrived on time. It was about me, especially when it was about a gift I didn't particularly like or want. We've all been there, right?

You know: "Dear Aunt and Uncle So-and-So, thank you very much for the beautiful fuchsia and yellow sweater I really don't like and makes my skin itch and isn't the right size and I will never wear." No. You find a way to say "thank you" even when the gift is not what you had in mind. Life is like that, isn't it?

Thank you shifts the focus from "me" to "us." To our relationship. From the gift itself to the love that prompted it. Gratitude, called a "relationship-strengthening emotion" by one researcher, fosters a sense of community. "Us" instead of "me."

Now bear with me here for a moment. For all you Dodgers fans out there still grieving Game Seven of the World Series, may it rest in peace. I want to take us back to Game 3 played in Houston two months after Hurricane Harvey made landfall. In a surprise move, the opening pitch was not thrown out by an Astros great, but by J.J. Watt, Houston Texas football star. It was quite a sight. Walking onto the field on crutches due to an injury that will require surgery on his leg, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. Why? Not because he's a football star with an injured leg. Because Watt spearheaded a major fundraising effort to repair and rebuild the city of Houston. His original goal was \$100,000. When that was reached in a matter of minutes, he continued on, eventually raising \$37 million dollars for hurricane relief from lemonade stands and millionaires.

He later said: "...to see the snowball effect, and to see how much good there is out there, and how many people wanted to get involved was incredible."

I want to take that amazing effort, born out of his gratitude to the fans and to the city, one step further. What if, just what IF...the Dodgers had also stepped up that night to say: "Houston, the people of Los Angeles are with you, too. We'll commit to a goal of \$1 million?, \$2 million?, \$5 million?....because we're one people, one nation."

Probably wouldn't have changed the outcome of the series. But it just might have changed some hearts and minds. And what a statement it would have made to a nation fractured and divided in these times. Differences aside, we are one.

The principles of generosity and gratitude give rise to a new way of seeing the world. And whether expressed to other people or to God, saying "thank you" and giving back, paying it forward, opens our hearts and grounds us in gratitude and forms us into generous and joyful people, created in God's image, the children of God's own heart.

Gratitude and generosity empower us, too. When we feel like things are bleak and there's nothing we can do, expressing gratitude moves us into action, to do what we can, whatever we can, as much as we can, because we've counted our blessings, one by one, and we know that our piggy bank of blessings is stuffed full, and we are humbled, and healed, and made whole.

This is a day to let our gratitude for the past inspire us with trust and hope for the future. Let us hear again God's never-ending YES in each and every blessing. And may our own YES in response be bold and beautiful, life-giving and life-changing.

Thanks be to God! AMEN

Notes:

Jason Marsh and Dacher Keltner. Thanksgiving and Gratitude: The Science of Happier Holidays. Nov. 28, 2014, Wall Street Journal.

Alene Dawson. Why Gratitude is So Good. Nov. 18, 2017, LA Times.

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