

November 18, 2018 • Charge Conference Sunday

“Reimagining our Thanks-giving Table” – GRATEFUL Sermon Series

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

I hope you’ve all made plans to stay after worship this morning for our annual church conference, led by our District Superintendent, Mark Nakagawa, in which we celebrate and hold ourselves accountable for our mission and ministry here at First UMC. The food will be great! And there is indeed much to celebrate, much for which we are deeply grateful, and much for which we give thanks. Called together by God in this place, across many generations, we are a community of love and service, a fellowship of compassion and prayer, a force for outreach and hope here, across the nation, and around the world. This is a fitting celebration for this Sunday before Thanksgiving, and the Sunday before Consecration Sunday next week on which will we dedicate our financial pledges for the coming year.

Our stewardship theme this year is “Grateful.” You’ve seen the logo, the letters mailed out to you, the refrigerator magnets asking “What are you grateful for?” and on the pledge cards in front of you today in the pew racks. Ever-expanding circles of “Grateful,” spiraling out across time and space, generation to generation, place to place to place.

Our theme comes from Diana Butler Bass’ latest book by the same name: “Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks.” On the first Sunday of November, we remembered the saints, giving thanks for all who have gone before, who by their lives and their example taught and showed us what it means to live as grateful and thankful people. Last Sunday we lifted up spiritual practices of gratitude, habits of being grateful that recalibrate our hearts and form us into the generous people God has created us to be.

Today we want to expand that out even further, reminding ourselves that being grateful is not just about me and my heart and my prayers and my hopes—but it’s also about us, gratitude spilling over so as to reform the community all around us into a place of safety and plenty. A thanksgiving table big enough for everyone.

Bass talks about gratitude in terms of four quadrants of a circle. Think of it as a pie...pumpkin? Pecan? Pick your favorite. A pie cut into four very generous quarters. Those are the four quadrants of our circle of gratitude. Two are about “me” and two are about “we.”

The first if the quadrant of “me” and my emotions. I experience gratitude and I feel—joy, surprise, delight. The second “me” quadrant is about response. I feel gratitude, and so, in return, I send a thank-you note, I return a dinner invitation with another, I reach out to someone who has offered a kindness to me.

Two “me” quadrants and now two “we” quadrants. We experience gratitude on an emotional level as a “we,” together in times of worship when our voices join in song, when we are comforted by the prayers of others, or around our Thanksgiving table, gathered as family and friends.

Her fourth gratitude quadrant is one we might not think of. It’s the “we” quadrant of responsibility, social responsibility and ethics. The gratitude we experience together spirals out to include everyone through stewardship, civic engagement, advocacy, striving to create for the whole body what Martin Luther King called “the beloved community.” Brothers and sisters all. A place at the table for each and everyone. Lives of beauty and plenty, safety and love. No longer limited to the “me and mine” because the “mine” has expanded to include the “all.” Gratitude has recalibrated our hearts far beyond our imagining, growing ever closer to the true heart of God.

And how our hearts have been stretched in these past 10 days as the fires have devastated our state. We’ve seen the photos and the aerial shots. Some of us had to evacuate. Some stayed awake keeping vigil through long, terrifying nights. Some have taken in those made homeless for a few days of nasty smoke-filled air. And now there are so many facing homelessness and uncertainty for countless months ahead as they contemplate if and when and where they might be able to rebuild. For all those of us looking forward to a Thanksgiving meal around the table with loved ones, our hearts ache

for those who, all of a sudden now, have no home at all, no table or chairs, no nothing but the clothes on their backs, the few possessions they grabbed before running for their lives.

And the beautiful, truly inspiring thing is, people have responded with a humungous out-pouring of generosity. Emergency supplies for people and pets. Money from individuals and foundations. People pledging to stand together with those who have lost so much, to keep communities and neighborhoods strong. To rebuild. To start over. To thrive again.

But now, we've got to go even further out with our circle of gratitude and love. Because, really, we know that there were far too many homeless and hungry people in our communities and on our streets long before the fires broke out last week. There's not enough affordable housing, not enough social services, not enough mental health outreach... This is the ethics of gratitude, the sense of "we-ness" God plants in our hearts, so that we long for what is right and good not just for ourselves, but for all God's children.

There's so much more we can and must do to make a place at the table for everyone. To make sure that there is a table for everyone. God's thanksgiving table.

Remembering the first Thanksgiving tables in America should inspire us again this year. We know the story, or some version of it. During that first winter on these shores, the Pilgrims were struggling to survive. Half died of scurvy, others succumbed to the harsh elements and lack of adequate food and shelter. The native people, too, were suffering. The Wampanoag tribe had been ravaged by diseases brought by the foreign explorers and were under attack from a neighboring tribe.

What transpires between these two struggling groups is perhaps the heart of the first Thanksgiving miracle. Two of the original tribe, Samoset and Squanto, had learned to speak English, and arranged a meeting between their chief, Massasoit, and John Carver, the first governor of the Plymouth Colony. They negotiated a treaty that not only insured the safety of both groups, but set in motion the mutually beneficial relationships that would allow them all to survive, in peace and harmony. In fact, Gov. William Bradford later called Squanto "a special instrument of God."

They agreed to bring no weapons to their meetings with one another and not to harm one another. They agreed, moreover, to look after one another's safety and well-being. And this new climate of mutual respect and concern made it safe for the natives to share their knowledge of local crops and harvesting that brought forth what we now call the first Thanksgiving feasts. Once enemies, the Pilgrims and native peoples shared together in the bounty of the land and in the bounty of goodwill that their wise and courageous leaders had put into place by daring to reach out a hand across divides of language and culture and religion to forge bonds of peace.

Together, their "me" transformed into an all-inclusive "we," they reimagined and created a bounteous and miraculous table of thanksgiving.

Just a bit later this morning, we'll leave these pews and gather around tables in Simkins Hall. And we'll share good food. We'll talk and laugh. We'll share our experiences of how these last 10 days unfolded. We'll hear the stories of mission and ministry from this year just past for which we indeed give God thanks and praise.

And through the course of our celebration today, may God weave circles of new vision, new hope, new resolve for all the possibilities that may await, opportunities not yet explored, acts of courage and generosity not yet dared.

For the Lord our God is still in our midst, recalibrating our hearts, our minds, our vision of the future. The Psalmist sang: "The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the desert. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

Notes:

This Stewardship Sermon Series is based on Diana Butler Bass' book: *Grateful—The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. New York: HarperOne, 2018.

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