

## IN PRAISE OF GRATITUDE

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It's a joy to be here this morning with folks participating in older adult ministries. As an older adult myself I appreciate the effort, care, and concern of church staff and volunteers who go out of their way to involve older adults in the life of the church. I'm grateful to Elaine Burrell, who leads our senior adult ministry at Pt. Loma Community Pres for inviting me to speak at this conference.

My theme this morning is acknowledging the importance of gratitude, especially in the lives of older adults. I've long been struck with the famous line from Meister Eckhart, the medieval German priest/philosopher who made this startling assertion: "If the only prayer you said is 'Thank you,' that is sufficient." This simple declaration may be an oversimplification, but its wisdom is worth saving for a rainy day.

So I'm going to suggest three aspects of thankfulness that I hope transform the abstract idea of gratitude into workable steps for understanding and practice. I want to credit Dr. Kathline Colvin for helping me turn the theoretical concept into practical stages. BTW, to be clear, there are two Kathleen Colvins—a mystery writer in Oregon and a California psychologist in Palm Desert. I'm talking about the psychologist here, not the mystery writer.

The first of these three stages of gratitude is simply acknowledging how much we have for which to be grateful. For us older adults, we have a ton of memories from days gone by that may be remembered fondly or recalled with bitterness. The famous Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote a piece that was set to music nearly 300 years ago. I'm sure you all know it:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot	For auld lang syne, my dear
And never brought to mind?	For auld lang syne
Should auld acquaintance be forgot	We'll drink a cup of kindness yet
And the days of auld lang syne?	For auld lang syne

Auld Lang Syne in Old Scots means simply, Old Long Since. It's a reflection on days gone by suggesting that old friends should never be forgotten. And the refrain of this beautiful poem carries a message of gratefulness: "We'll drink a cup of kindness yet for auld lang syne." And every New Year's Eve in parties throughout the English-speaking world, folks continue to sing of their gratefulness for friends from long ago.

But we don't have to go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century to find songs that remind of us of gratitude. In 1893 a 5-year old boy emigrated to the United States with his Jewish family to escape Tsarist persecution in Russia. This boy, Israel Beilin, changed his name to Irving Berlin because of the rampant antisemitism in New York a century ago. But he chose not to focus on his victimization. The 1954 film "White Christmas" starring Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney featured one of Berlin's memorable songs:

If you're worried and you can't sleep  
Just count your blessings instead of sheep  
And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings.

Such sage advice: count your blessings. What a concept. And what a practical, positive, affirming way to acknowledge one's gratitude.

He also wrote another old song originally performed by Ethel Merman but later made popular by Doris Day:

Got no mansion, got no yacht  
 Still I'm happy with what I've got  
 I've got the sun in the morning and the moon at night.

Got no checkbooks, got no banks  
 Still I'd like to express my thanks  
 I've got the sun in the morning and the moon at night.

These American pop songs that sprang from Tin Pan Alley in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are hardly works of profound psychology. But there's an element of folk wisdom embedded in their lyrics that continues to resonate today, especially with the generation whose parents used to sing them around the house. And they reflect a truth easily overlooked by folks who may be focusing on what they have lost rather than what they continue to enjoy.

So to summarize, this first stage is simply looking around and acknowledging all for which we have to be grateful—the gift of nature, of friends, and of life itself!

The second of these three stages of gratitude extends beyond the first because it involves voicing your thankfulness to God and to those around you who help make your life worth living. Our scripture reading this morning from Psalm 92 expresses it perfectly. Let me read it again from a 1994 translation called the *Liturgical Psalter*:

How good to thank you, Lord,  
 to praise your name, Most High,  
 to sing your love at dawn,  
 your faithfulness at dusk  
 with sound of lyre and harp,  
 with music of the lute.  
 For your work brings delight,  
 Your deeds invite song.  
 —Psalm 92:1-4

The Psalms have been around for more than 3,000 years, and they express the collective wisdom of ancient people of God that have been preserved in our sacred scriptures. This hymnbook of the ages is filled with expressions of gratefulness for the goodness of God.

We Americans have our own dedicated a day of gratefulness that we call "Thanksgiving Day," which was originally drafted by President Abraham Lincoln on October 3, 1863 in the midst of the War between the States. He opened his proclamation with these words:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and even soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

After a lengthy commentary upon the dire circumstances facing our nation, he concluded with this invitation:

I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens . . . to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a Day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

And so we have this invitation from one of America's most beloved and respected presidents to look heavenward with gratefulness for the bounty that is ours through the goodness of God.

But even this is not enough, because it's also important to express thanks to people in one's immediate community. Do you remember when writing "Thank you" notes was a customary response after receiving a gift? My mother always insisted on my writing notes to my grandparents and aunts for gifts regardless how small or insignificant. As I've grown older, I still write such notes and put them in the mail. But I've noticed how the younger generation tends to send emails or texts with their sentiments of gratitude. No matter! It's the expression that counts, not the medium. And while receiving such messages is gratifying, sending them also gives the sender a sense of joy. Indeed, someone once said, "Silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone!"

This is not simply "etiquette," although it may be how many regard it. And there are a lot of ways to express gratitude without writing it down. The important thing is to express it in a manner that communicates to the other that their gift or gesture or kindness was both noted and appreciated.

This seemingly trivial manifestation of appreciation carries potential gain for anyone expressing his or her thanks. The CDC reports that loneliness and isolation in older adults are serious public health risks affecting a significant number of people in our country and putting them at risk for dementia and other serious medical conditions. A recent research study pointed out that nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated because they are more likely to face such factors as living alone, the loss of family and friends, and chronic illness. Expressions of thanks are one way to strengthen human connections.

Now it's true that opening up and expressing our appreciation to someone else makes us more vulnerable to them. This entails some risk, because our offer of thanks may be rejected or downplayed or even poo-hooed. But expressing gratitude to someone else may create an emotional bond, which alleviates loneliness and creates opportunities for social connections that are good for one's physical and mental health. And when this outcome is achieved, it's a win-win for all parties because emotional bonding is the basis for friendship.

So to summarize, this second stage is simply expressing one's gratefulness to God and to those who enrich our lives by their presence.

The third stage of gratitude is to incorporate it into one's very being or soul—to make it a way of life. It affects the way we think as well as the way we act. An attitude of gratitude results in showing more sympathy and expressing less judgment toward others. Rather than responding to challenging events or situations with regret or resentment, we can choose a more positive response.

Having spent more than half my life in academia, I'll take a moment to introduce an influential figure whose work I taught for many years in my class in theories of personality.

Erik Erikson, born in Germany a half century after Freud, was intrigued with Freud's ideas but refused to accept that human development was, for all intents and purposes, over at adolescence. Freud, you may recall, believed that the human personality was essentially formed by the age of five or six. Erikson, on the other hand, expanded Freud's stages of development across the life span, concluding with an eighth stage, which begins around age 65. He called this stage "Wisdom."

He characterizes this later stage in life having two polarities, which comprise a continuum on which each person chooses to fall. One of these is despair, resulting in regret, disappointment, and a sense of having failed. The other is Integrity, resulting in fulfillment, satisfaction, and gratefulness. Of course, most of us fall somewhere on the range between these two extremes.

It is important to acknowledge that one cannot change the past. The events that have unfolded during one's lifetime are part of our history, and these cannot be changed. But the good news is that our interpretation of these events is well within our grasp. While we cannot rewrite history, we can reframe the meanings of this history in our lives. Everyone here has experienced failure at some point in his/her life. Everyone can name a regret (or two or three). Everyone knows the empty feeling of disappointment. Thankfully, few of us choose to define ourselves by these experiences because we have also experienced success and joy and satisfaction across the years that remain uppermost in our consciousness. And this is where an attitude of gratefulness can enable anyone to reframe their understanding of the past.

As we age it is easy to get caught up in the losses we have experienced across the years. Physical losses are keenly felt as we lose abilities we once took for granted. But if these become the object of our attention, we overlook the host of things for which we have to be grateful.

Let me share a personal example of how this played out in my life just five years ago. I rode a motorcycle for more than 50 years of my adult life. I commuted to my place of work at SDSU for nearly 40 years on my motorcycle—and never had a problem finding a place to park! I rode cross-country, I rode to Canada and into Mexico, and I loved cruising the freeways around San Diego on my motorcycle. Being a biker became part of my identity.

But after knee-replacement surgery in 2019, I found that I couldn't mount the bike as easily as before. And my wife had been urging me to stop riding ever since I turned 80. So I made the decision to donate my beautiful BMW Cruiser to KPBS, and when I saw it loaded onto the big truck I wanted to weep. It represented the end of an era for me, one in which I had to embrace the reality of being too old to ride any more. It was a bitter day, and in some ways I'm still dealing with it. But as I came to accept a new reality, I developed a sense of gratitude for the half-century of joy motorcycle riding gave me.

This is one example of accepting the past while reframing its meaning. Another is found in a single line from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus taught us to pray. "Forgive us our debts," he said, "as we forgive our debtors." Now while this is a prayer for forgiveness, it also instructs us to let go of resentment and regret, of reframing past injuries by forgiving those who caused them. This is not rewriting history, but reframing it through viewing it in a different light. Indeed, it is an act of gratitude to God for the divine forgiveness we have experienced.

So I leave you with these three thoughts. Maintain a keen awareness of the blessings for which you are grateful: the natural world of Creation, your friendships and kinships, and life itself. Second, express your gratefulness to God and to those around you who enhance the quality of your life. Remember: silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone. And finally, make gratitude your default attitude as you reflect upon the past and look forward to the years ahead.