

## **An Awkward Beginning**

I remember the first time I prayed in public. It was at our weekly youth group meetings. At the end of our Bible Study we were asked, “which one of us would like to pray,” and, having been newly baptized, I thought sure I can do this. So I began, “God, thank you for this day, for this time, for these friends, thank you for” this and for that, and then I got stuck. I said thank you and then left and awkward pause, and repeated myself, “thank you,” hoping to come up with something else to say, but I was at a loss. As embarrassment crept over me, “thank you for... uh, “ my mind panicked and tried to find a way out, “uh...thank you for...um,” how does one close an awkward prayer, “ah...thank you for...,” my friends were starting to laugh, “...um... thank you God, Amen.” Was how it ended.

No doubt, most everyone there has since forgotten this clumsy prayer, but it’s stuck with me. I’ve always looked back on this prayer as an awkward, juvenile, amateur and foolish attempt to pray, but as I’ve spent time considering gratitude this week, new light was shone on this prayer, and I realize that there’s another way to look at this prayer of seemingly unending thanks. Maybe this prayer wasn’t as amateur or awkward as I think it was, maybe it was more genuine and honest than prayers prayed since.

“Karl Barth was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is gratitude—not fear and trembling, not guilt and fear, but thanksgiving. ‘What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise.’” Something that I very well embodied in that awkward prayer.

This Sunday we celebrate Thanksgiving. I was surprised to learn this week that Thanksgiving is primarily a North American holiday. For Canadians, Thanksgiving is a holiday which recognizes the bounty of harvest, and for us, in the church, at least, we recognize that much of what we have comes from our creating and generous God. On Thanksgiving it is right for us to name all those things which we are thankful for; for God has indeed blessed us greatly. Many if not all of us have enough to eat, we all have homes that provide shelter, we all have warm beds to sleep

in. We have all that we need to survive and really, we have all that we need to thrive, some have more than that.

Compared to many other parts of the world, North America holds most of the world's wealth. We are top 1% of the world. We are the have's and we live abundantly. I must be careful here, because I could easily become critical and cynical at this point and name all the ways that we in North America live excessively, many of which I am equally guilty of. Whether it is through the ownership of many or just the newest automobiles, the desire and longing for the newest digital gadget, because the current one doesn't do what the new one does, or homes that are unnecessarily larger than what we need, because we need more room to store our stuff. It's pretty obvious to me that we, in North America and Canada, live quite abundantly.

### **Trappings of Abundance**

We are an abundant people. And with that comes a temptation. The Israelites are warned of this in our Deuteronomy reading. After being promised so much abundance, God provides a warning, and a reminder that they should not fall into the temptation of believing that their abundance is from the work of their hands. God reminds them that their abundance comes from God. In North America, in our own abundance, it's very easy for us to work God out of things. We can very easily fall into a trap of arrogance believing that all that we have; all that we possess; is because of our own hard work. And that's the same trap that the Israelites were warned about, what we must remember, is that our abundance is from God. Now I know that I'm treading dangerously close to prosperity Gospel territory here, but know this, that when I say our abundance is from God, it's a recognition, and not a boast. In fact, recognizing that all that we have comes from God, I think, ought to place us in a posture of humility, which is why the best, and perhaps only response, is that of gratitude.

### **Practicing Gratitude**

A number of years ago while visiting with a colleague, the colleague mentioned that they noticed that I was being fairly negative. And they challenged me, that every time I reflected on something negative, something that wasn't going my way, that I was to also think of one thing that I was grateful for, something to thank God for.

I was reminded of this practice this week and I remembered why, at that time it stuck with me. Two reasons, I noticed that after a week or so of practicing this I was finding more and more things to be grateful for, and also I was finding that I was becoming a more grateful person. The practice of Gratitude, changed my perspective on world and God's actions, and it also changed me as a person.

One commentator reflected that we should be grateful not because of what God has done, because not everything goes perfectly, or our way, but rather that we should be grateful because God simply is. And that's the thought that I want you to take away with you, that we're grateful, that we're thankful for God being God and for God being near. "Gratitude is rooted in the reality that "bidden or unbidden, God is present." And that should be both a comfort and something that we model. So much of the disciplined life is lived out, and for us to live out gratitude, is to live with a sense of gratefulness for God's continued presence, God's faithfulness, and God's care.

Living with a sense of gratitude for God's persistent presence transforms our attitudes about how God interacts with creation. It transforms our understanding of God from being one who does things for us, to one who simply is with us, Emmanuel, the name used for Jesus.

"The basic Christian response to God is gratitude: gratitude for the gift of life, gratitude for the world, gratitude for the sea of people God has give us to enrich and grace our lives. The basic Christian experience is gratitude to God for God's love in Jesus Christ and the accompanying gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness that comes with it, regardless of the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Writer Anne Lamott says her two favourite prayers are, in the morning "Help me. Help me. Help me." and at bedtime, "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you."

On Thanksgiving, we give thanks to God for all that God provides, for all that God has done, and for all that God is at work doing. We also remember that not everyone can or does live as abundantly as we do. And...that's not all.

God also calls us to be generous with the abundance that God gives us. To bless others with what we have been blessed with. Our treasures in heaven are not stored here on earth. They are not kept in our root cellars, or in banks, or in property. Our treasures come from the generosity we show to our neighbour. As we give of the time so generously gifted to us, and as we give of the abundance that we have so generously been blessed with we store up proverbial treasures in heaven. Gratefulness and generosity are woven together, they are linked to one another. They need to be. One without the other is what leads us into the tempting territory of selfishness. And Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to make this same connection. To remember that “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you make share abundantly in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:8, NRSV) Our response to God’s generosity is both thankfulness and generosity on our part.

On this Thanksgiving day, we have much to be thankful for. I have much to be thankful for. But our thanksgiving must not end there. It must not end with us giving thanks to God for all that God has done. Our thanksgiving must also be extended, and be one where out of our gratitude we give generously, of our time, of our resources, of our gifts and of our abundance. Our thanksgiving must also remember our neighbours, both near and far. Our thanksgiving, must be one where we remember God and God’s Kingdom.

Amen.