

Rev. Joan Pell
Sierra Pines United Methodist Church
Sermon: 10/14/2018
Series: *The Way of Gratefulness*
Scripture: Psalm 136:1-9, 26, James 1:17



Everything is a Gift

NOTE: This sermon is mainly a summary of the ideas in a book by Diana Butler Bass called *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*



< Psalm 136:1-9, 26 (CEB)>

¹ Give thanks to the LORD because he is good.
God's faithful love lasts forever!

² Give thanks to the God of all gods—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

³ Give thanks to the Lord of all lords—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁴ Give thanks to the only one who makes great wonders—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁵ Give thanks to the one who made the skies with skill—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁶ Give thanks to the one who shaped the earth on the water—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁷ Give thanks to the one who made the great lights—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁸ The sun to rule the day—
God's faithful love lasts forever.

⁹ The moon and the stars to rule the night—
God's faithful love lasts forever!

²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven—
God's faithful love lasts forever!

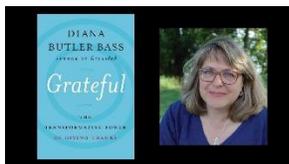
<James 1:17>

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

When I stand up here each week delivering the sermon, the message I speak is God's word for me as much as it is for you. God uses my spiritual reading and my life experiences and current events in the world to influence and nudge me towards topics



for future sermon series. In the Summer of 2016, I vacationed in Scotland and visited Iona Abbey. The ancient Abbey on Iona was rebuilt in the 1940's having fallen into ruin and the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian community, was formed to practice the Celtic spirituality that had been lost in time. That visit led me to doing a sermon series in summer 2017 that I called *Living the Blessing Way* as we learned together about Celtic Spirituality and a faith that observes and celebrates the blessings in the ordinary acts and encounters of life.

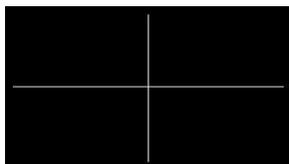


In the Spring of this year, as a result of preaching that series, I was particularly drawn to read a newly published book called *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* by Diana Butler Bass. She is a progressive Christian and an author that I like, so I was excited to read her new book, and I was not disappointed. As we now approach Thanksgiving, this sermon series *The Way of Gratefulness* is based on the ideas in her book.



Who likes writing thank-you notes? Who finds it a chore? How often do you give a gift and not receive a thank you note? As I

write this sermon, I have just remembered a note that I *intended* to write this week and failed to do. There is a disconnect sometimes between the gratitude we feel and how we act.



Diana Butler Bass in her book thinks about gratitude in **four dimensions**.¹ There are **two aspects of experience**: There is how we feel about an event, our emotions. And there is how we act in response to a gift, our ethics. And there are **two arenas of our lives**. We can also think about gratitude as personal gratitude or individual gratitude and a privatized spirituality. But then there is the question as to what it means to live together in community as a thankful society. Our fears and disappointments with our neighbors and the thoughts that someone else is taking more than their share and that there is never enough result in cravings for things we think will fill us leading to all sorts of addictive behavior and fuels politics of protection, limits and rage. That is not a vision of a community of gratitude. Some have even said we are a society of ingrates.²

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (New York: Harper One, 2018), xxvi-xxvii.

² *Ibid.*, xviii.



When we put these two aspects of experience together with the two arenas, we have **four areas** of gratitude to consider.

Individual feelings. Individual actions. Community feelings.

Community actions. Most of us lean towards one of these

understandings of gratitude more than other. Yet, we can become off-balance and have a distorted view when we do so. We will take these one by one in the next 4 weeks to grow in a fuller vision of gratitude and well-being. We will start today by considering our **individual feelings** such as the awe, surprise and appreciation we feel when someone helps us, serves us or gives us a gift. This is gratitude in terms of **delight, joy or surprise.**



The emotion of gratitude involves various feelings that occur as an **unplanned response** to an event. It could be happiness and relief at the safe delivery of a baby or finding a lost pet, or surviving a narrow miss while driving. It could be thankfulness for completing a house repair task or finally tidying your closet. It could be a sense of awe at concert or seeing all the fall leaves. It could be the sense of pleasure we get from giving another a gift. "There is no one experience of gratitude, it is a complex and episodic thing, and one that is deeply personal."³

THREE points about personal feelings and gratitude.



ONE. For a long time, gratitude was understood to be an **obligation** to repay a favor or a gift; a **quid pro quo**, or something for something. It was also a means of patronage, power and control. Returning the favor is a **duty**. In the days of old, the emperor or king gives the gift of protection and provision; the subjects offer loyalty, service and taxes. If you refuse to send your son to serve in the army, you are an ingrate, and it might be punishable by enslavement or death. A gift is given, a debt is incurred, and a favor owed. Benefits flowed down. Wealth flowed up. Constitutions eventually replaced emperors and kings and laws were created to distribute political benefits. But that feeling of indebtedness still lingers. We have a desire to not be in debt to someone. We prefer self-sufficiency. Many of us struggle with receiving gifts. We like the giving but not the receiving. We like our independence.⁴



None of us though is truly independent. Our faith teaches us that we need each other, the earth and God. And the thread of that interdependence is **grace**. The words gratitude and grace come from the same root. Grace means "unmerited favor" **Grace is a gift given without being earned and with no expectation of return, and it is amazing.** You can neither earn it, nor pay it

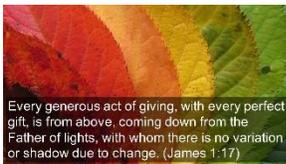
³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Ibid., 9-17.

back, so you are filled with gratitude. **Grace begets gratitude. Grace reminds us that every good thing is a gift.**⁵

Sometimes we know who to thank for a gift. But there are some gifts when we have no way to thank the person who gave them. The person in front of you in the drive-through who paid for your coffee. And other gifts like the gift of health, unexpected good luck, or awe and wonder at the gifts of nature where no giver is involved. As Christians, we usually thank God and say a prayer thinking of God as the ultimate benefactor. But then we have a duty and obligation to God. Diana Butler Bass suggests though that these gifts that we thank God for are not targeted gifts and obligations to be repaid; they are simply gifts to be enjoyed. There is no transaction. So, perhaps a better image for God is God as an **Indiscriminate Giver**.⁶ It reminds me of the parable of the Sower where the farmer sows the seed everywhere.

James 1:17 says: ¹⁷ *Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* Every act of giving is a reflection of the light. A light that shines everywhere all the time is available to all; it is untargeted giving. **Untargeted gratitude** takes us out of the cycle of obligation into the **larger circle of shared gifts and mutual enjoyment and responsibility for those gifts**; it makes us more generous.⁷



Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)



TWO. Our hearts are the seats of our emotions. The seat of gratitude is the heart. We have all heard of people who have died of broken hearts. Gratitude drives out the toxic emotions of resentment, anger and envy and is associated with better long term emotional and physical health. John Wesley spoke about his heart being strangely warmed and the importance of our experiences. Methodists approach theological questions guided by John Wesley's viewpoint that "the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, **vivified in personal and corporate experience**, and confirmed by reason."⁸ Feelings about things were important to Wesley.

But it is hard to feel what you have never been taught to feel. While many churches "seem to teach gratitude as transaction, a *quid pro quo* of faith. God loves us, so we must love God back, and if we do not, God sends us to hell. This is a deeply inadequate view of gratitude. ...*Salvation is just one more transaction in a closed cycle of gratitude.*"⁹ What if we can create a spiritual environment that teaches people to feel abundance in the face of suffering and injustice as a way to better know God and

⁵ Ibid., 18-20.

⁶ Ibid., 24-27.

⁷ Ibid., 26-27.

⁸ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 57 (¶103).

⁹ Bass, 33.

oneself?" We might look to the African Americans and the black churches that have historically incorporated thanksgiving in the midst of oppression. Negative emotions can run counter to thanksgiving. Yet grateful people seem to be able to succumb less to negative emotions. Negative emotions are not always our fault. They have complex origins. Never appropriate to cover up or deny abuse or excuse injustice. Gratitude as a placebo can be another form of abuse. But, we have to learn to embrace what is there. Suffering happens. Suffering increases when we ignore the reality of the pain and resist, deny or fear negative emotions. We need to be able to recognize what causes pain, work towards healing and live in the world with empathy, forgiveness and gratitude. We rightly rage against indignities, but if we can enfold the pain in a greater good, we can claim the fullness of life.¹⁰



THREE. Diana Butler Bass uses this metaphor. Your emotional life is like a garden. The soil is the territory in which our feelings grow. Left untended, certain emotions can crowd out others, like weeds that crowd out vegetable plants. There is nothing inherently wrong with weeds, but they get in the way of dinner! It takes a watchful gardener and lots of practice to ensure health and productivity. Hard work on your knees is the surest way to tend a garden. Good and bad things go into the soil, like suffering. From the soil grows positive and negative emotions. The spiritual work of gratitude and learning what to let go of leads to a flourishing garden. Gratitude grows in good soil, and we can think of the bad things that happen as manure or organic matter that with the right treatment can enrich the dirt. From the ground can spring new life.¹¹



Gratitude at its deepest is not warm feelings about what we have, it is the deep ability to embrace who we are. **Life is a gift.** Everything is a gift from our **Indiscriminate Giving God.** When we experience life as a gift to treasure and feel its power even in the hardest of circumstances, we will have gratitude. And grateful people are full of **grace.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Let us pray...God of wonders, fill our hearts with gratitude. <Silent Reflection> Surprise us with your unexpected gifts - gifts that we have not deserved or earned. Give us the capacity to be thankful in the midst of experiencing fear and anger and other negative emotions. Takes us out of the cycle of obligation into the larger circle of shared gifts and mutual enjoyment and responsibility for those gifts. Transform us into generous, grace-filled, thankful people living the way of gratefulness. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Resource

Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks.* New York: Harper One, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid., 34-39.

¹¹ Ibid., 40-42.