

Faith Mennonite Church
September 9, 2012
Living into Community
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Stopping to give thanks

Deuteronomy 6:4-12; Luke 17:11-19

A 92-year-old man was moving into a care facility following the death of his wife of 70 years. Although legally blind, he was up and fully dressed and shaved by 8 o'clock each morning. When he arrived at the center, he needed to wait for some time until his room was ready. He waited patiently and when someone finally came to say his room was ready he responded with a smile.

As the attendant aided the man and his walker toward the elevator, the attendant began to describe the room. The man broke in and said, "I love it!"

"But we haven't gotten there yet for you to inspect the room," said the attendant.

"That doesn't matter or have anything to do with it," said the man. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged. It's how I arrange my mind. I already decided that I love it."

"It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up," he continued. "I have a choice: I can spend the day in bed thinking about the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that don't work anymore, or I can get up and be thankful for the ones that do."

I don't know what the atmosphere was like in this care center before this man arrived, but I can imagine that whatever sense of community existed took a big leap forward as soon as he moved in. It's hard to complain or feel sorry for oneself when someone is present who expresses gratitude so freely, even in the face of hardship. Gratitude is infectious and, according to Christine Pohl, whose book *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* will be the guide for our worship and adult discussions during the month of September, and our fall retreat in October, gratitude is a must for a community to thrive.

Gratitude doesn't just happen; it is a response to a gift received. For Christians this gift is grace, the unbounded and unfathomable love and forgiveness that God extends to us in Christ. Here at Faith Mennonite we probably talk more about "following Jesus" and the ethical dimensions of our spiritual life, than about grace. But our ability to follow in faith, at least to do so in a joy-filled manner, depends on our experience of accepting and knowing this deep love that God has for us so that we can experience the freedom of forgiveness and extend this forgiveness to those around us.

Gratitude operates at three levels, according to Pohl:

- 1) thanksgiving and praise
- 2) gratitude as a posture for life
- 3) gratitude as a response to others for what they have given us

Let's take a look at each of these, beginning with *thanksgiving and praise*. We come to church on Sunday for many reasons: to see friends; to listen to Scripture and to receive guidance for our lives; to share our joys and concerns with one another and to uphold one another in prayer. We come to sing. And in our singing, perhaps more than any other aspect of our gathering, we allow ourselves to offer thanksgiving and praise to God. Music moves us into dimensions beyond what the spoken word alone does.

But all of these actions together are an act of thanksgiving. Our coming together for an hour or two once a week acknowledges that our lives are held together by something more than the work and activities of our lives. Quietening ourselves before God and reciting the affirmations spoken by generations of faith, remind us that the burdens we bear are at once important to God and minuscule in the grandeur of the cosmos. Giving thanks and praise frees us from thinking that we alone matter, that our concerns alone are the most important. And this is a foundational element of community: that we care for one

another as much as we care for ourselves. Gathering for worship is a primary way that we heed the call in Deuteronomy that we not forget the work of God in our lives.

The gratitude we express and nurture through thanksgiving and praise contributes to the gratitude we cultivate as a *posture for life*. What does a posture of gratitude look like? Pohl writes that When our lives are shaped by gratitude, we're more likely to notice the goodness and beauty in everyday things. We are content; we feel blessed and are anxious to confer blessing. We are able to delight in the very existence of another human being. In a grateful community individuals and their contributions are acknowledged and honored, and there is regular testimony to God's faithfulness, through which the community experiences the joy of its members. Expressions of gratitude make the community alive to the Word, the Spirit, and God's work.¹

When we read the epistles of the New Testament, where we observe the early church learning what it meant to live transformed lives, we read numerous admonitions to give thanks and to live lives of gratitude. The apostle Paul and other writers had a keen sense that there was a close link between gratitude and conduct. Our gratitude to God spills over into our desire to live close to God, in ways that please God.

The opposite of a posture of gratitude, of course, is a culture of complaint. Just as gratitude gives life to a community, complaints suck out the life. Pohl took part in a study of a number of Christian communities. She and her fellow observers concluded that "ingratitude is not only annoying and unpleasant, it's dangerous," because when we focus on flaws, whether in the church, in our families or at work, they tend to dominate. Developing and maintaining a posture of gratitude isn't just a personal task then, but a corporate endeavor. As a congregation we will become more of what we emphasize, of where we place our gaze.

My experience here at Faith is that our posture of gratitude is quite strong and well-developed. I receive and hear very few complaints about other people or the way things get done. We joke about the "speed of church," recognizing that some things don't move along as quickly as we would like. Yet this is not due so much to negligence as to the fact that we depend so heavily on volunteers who have other primary commitments. I do hear suggestions and at times concerns, but these are generally offered in a spirit of opportunity for growth rather than complaining. Several years ago one of the moderators of our church council suggested an addition to our monthly agenda and ever since we have been giving time in each meeting for people to offer affirmations for individuals and activities that are contributing to the life of our community.

When we embody a posture of gratitude we will naturally and frequently *respond to others for what they have given to us*. We see a beautiful example of this response in our Gospel story today. A group of lepers, people who, due to a contagious skin condition, lived on the margin of the community, kept a safe distance from Jesus as they begged for healing. Other stories confirm that Jesus had no compunctions about touching and interacting with those who were considered ritually unclean or social outcasts, but in this occasion he kept his distance, simply sending them on their way to the priest, which was a necessary step in receiving verification that one was indeed healthy and able to return to the community. Evidently, as the group walked away, their condition began to disappear. I imagine the whole group was elated and eager to follow Jesus' directions to go to the priest so they could return home as quickly as possible. But one man, a Samaritan, one with a double stigma—physical and religious—as long as he was in Jewish territory, stopped and came back. Like the old man moving into the care facility, somehow, despite his disability and disadvantage, he had developed a posture of gratitude. He couldn't help but come back and offer thanksgiving and praise. He dropped to his knees and fully prostrated himself at Jesus' feet.

There are many ways we can respond to the gifts of others and we will get a chance to share ideas during our 2nd hour this morning. The reading from Deuteronomy offers a few suggestions:

1. recite daily the things we are thankful for: begin the day, end the day, and pause before meals to give thanks.

¹ Christine Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us*. 2011.

2. Place reminder notes in one's home and office and send notes of gratitude to others.

Sometimes it's difficult to acknowledge the gifts of others because we feel envious or embarrassed that we stand in need of a gift. Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities for people with developmental and cognitive disabilities, has written that "envy is one of the plagues that destroys community. It comes from people's ... lack of belief in their own gifts. If we were confident in our own gifts, we would not envy that of others." Expressing gratitude to another is a fine opportunity to pause and consider what gift we can share. It may be different, it may not draw as much attention, but each of us has a gift to share, and we should never underestimate how something as simple as a handshake and a hello—the acknowledgment of another—will be received as a gift.

As we gather at the Lord's table today, we remember that "costly sacrifice and gratitude are profoundly intertwined in this meal. Jesus offered thanks over the bread and wine before passing it among his disciples, of whom one had betrayed him, one would deny him, and all would desert him. Still he offered thanks, saying grace by offering up both words and his very life. Jesus graced the dreadful evening of his betrayal with gratitude."² Let us come to the table in that same spirit.

² Ibid.