

Peace Church, Munich Germany  
Sunday, 26 July 2009  
Emily Zumpe, Lay Preacher

**Giving Thanks**  
**Ephesians 3: 14-21**

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the day that the Lord has made – let us rejoice and be glad in it! We have so much to be glad about and to give thanks for this morning – for this church, new babies, the baptism of little Hope Williams, a new start – for our own health and the fact that we can sit together in God’s house this morning.

But can we really rejoice today? Can we really be glad this morning, when each of us is also dealing with struggles and problems in our own lives? When the world is tossing us about and loading us down with burdens, like in the hymn we sang this morning, can we really count our blessings? And, perhaps more importantly, why should we?

These are questions that I have been considering for the past few weeks. It all began on Friday, July 3, when I read the Upper Room daily devotional guide. The entry from an Englishwoman was titled Thank-o-meter. She writes, “Not long ago I bought a pedometer – one of those gizmos to clip onto my waistband to measure how many steps I take. I read somewhere that we should take at least 10,000 steps a day to stay healthy. One day a friend told me she wondered what score she would have if – instead of a pedometer – she wore a thank-o-meter, a little machine to measure how much gratitude we have, instead of how far we walk.”

The first question in my mind was, “how many “steps” or instances of giving thanks per day would I need to be healthy? 10,000?” I began to become more aware of how often, or shall I say, how little I was giving thanks throughout my day. When it rained that day, I thought, “I wish I could stay in bed” rather than “thank you God for watering my plants.” And when a colleague at work was not very nice, I thought, “why do I have to deal with this person every day” rather than “thank you God that I still have a job.” And then I remembered the thank-o-meter, and I began to envision this little gizmo, this little machine, hanging on my belt, counting each time I showed gratitude or thanks. When I went to bed that night, after only one day of consciously giving thanks to, I had already become much more aware of all the things I had to be truly thankful for!

So when I looked at the Methodist lectionary to find the suggested Bible verses for this Sunday, I was very happy to discover Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. It is a text I studied in college and my old study guide summarizes verses 14-21 as, "Paul's prayer that we would all know God's blessings in our deepest being." That is my hope for us all this morning – that God may bless this time in order to reveal His or Her countless blessings to us in the deepest parts of our souls. I believe that realizing God's blessings in our lives gives us a better perspective, but as I began to consider the Bible text in more detail, the question kept bothering me, "how much thanks do I have to give in order to be healthy?" And I began to wonder, "Can giving thanks truly make us healthy?"

So for an answer from the world's perspective, I turned to the internet, the one-stop-shop for knowledge in modern society. I Googled "benefits of giving thanks" and I was shocked to find over 12 million responses. Obviously, this was a topic that had gained some interest. In surfing about, I found many articles, books and studies with titles like, "*The How of Happiness*," "*Happy for No Reason: 7 Steps to Being Happy from the Inside Out*" and "*Counting Blessings Versus Burdens*." Most of these claimed that if you want to be happier in life, the first step is to begin to show gratitude to others. My interest was piqued. Let's be honest with ourselves – we would all like to be a bit happier, wouldn't we? I was looking for information about whether or not giving thanks could make me healthier – I had never considered that I might also find more happiness just by giving thanks, so I read on.

One book was written by Robert Emmons, an American Professor of Psychology at the University of California; *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Professor Emmons did clinical studies asking groups of people to write either a "hassle journal" of everything that was bothering them, or a "gratitude journal" of everything they were thankful for every day. His study proved that, "spending a few moments every day focusing on the good can nourish a positive attitude... Gratitude works because, as a way of perceiving and interpreting life, it recruits other positive emotions, like joy, contentment, and hope." One writer named Lyubomirsky agreed that giving thanks "boosts your self-esteem and feelings of self-worth". She said that "instead of getting angry when things go wrong, you can concentrate on the things you value the most. Eventually, this becomes an automatic response." In other words, beginning to give thanks leads us to continue to give thanks, and this leads us to get and to keep our lives in a proper perspective – focusing on what is most important.

Professor Emmons believes that, “showing gratitude brings more happiness, more optimism, and more connectedness. Millions of people struggle with depression, and research has shown that depressed people engage in a self-focus that intensifies their sadness. By practicing gratitude, attention is directed away from the self and more to others and what they are providing for us. Gratitude also motivates us to deepen relationships with people whom we currently don’t know all that well.” Lyubomirsky thinks gratitude can also help us to cope with trauma. “Painful memories are less likely to surface for people who are grateful – and they’re less intense when they do. Because if you’re focused on what’s good in your life right now, you’re better able to deal with negative emotions from your past.”

In his studies, Professor Emmons not only found emotional benefits for those who wrote about their blessings each day in a journal; he also found “direct physical benefits” of their gratitude; “People exercise more, get better sleep, and report more energy and vitality.” Why? The theory is that people who are aware of the blessings they already have in their lives don’t take their health for granted. They want to maintain their health and improve it. They’re also better at managing stress, which improves their health. Emmons said, “Clinically, here is a powerful reason for giving thanks. Gratitude is the best approach to life.”

Funny that Emmons and his research are touted as ground-breaking. The Biblical author Paul shares this same perspective – gratitude is the best approach to life – though he lived thousands of years earlier and had no degree in psychology. Paul’s belief in the power of gratitude is not based on clinical study, but on his own life experience. And Paul, the author of Ephesians, is a strange man to be urging us to give thanks.

Originally raised by the learned men of his days, the Pharisees in the Jewish community, Paul was a very loud and dangerous persecutor of early Christians. He witnessed Stephen’s stoning and vowed to wipe out the sect of people who followed Jesus Christ. But one day Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus, and only regained his sight when touched by a follower of Jesus Christ. After that, Paul made a 180 degree turn in his life and his profession; he went from chasing and harming Christians, to being chased and imprisoned for being a Christian. He spent many years traveling through Asia to spread the word of Jesus’ love, but traveling back then did not include airplanes and rolling suitcases. He was homeless and often alone and hungry. In the beginning, he was ridiculed for his new faith since he had been such a strong opponent of Christ. And in the end, Paul was put to death in Rome by King Nero. So what can this man teach us about giving thanks?

Our sermon text begins in Ephesians chapter 3 verse 1. Paul calls himself a “prisoner for Christ Jesus” and claims that “the mystery was made known to (him).” These are dramatic words, written by a man who had undergone dramatic experiences. As a student of the Pharisees, Paul was taught that only learned Jews were members of the Family of God; only people of a certain background, class, race, religion were able to fellowship with God. Paul defied all those traditions when he claimed that Gentiles, the word used back then for any non-Jewish people, had also become “fellow heirs” and “sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus.” In verse 7, Paul claims that realizing this truth – that all men, women and children are welcome in the Family of God – had transformed him into a servant to this message. He felt compelled to share this breakthrough, this idea which shook up the foundations of society and religion thousands of years ago. Paul did not think that he needed to share this life-changing message because he was a special preacher or chosen man – he called himself “less than the least of all God’s people.” But out of a spirit of deep gratitude for the changes God had made in Paul’s life, he felt compelled to serve the Lord and to spread this message of unity and love.

Paul could have been angry at God for blinding him for 3 days. He could have asked, “why me?” or simply called out to God, “leave me alone.” He could have sunk into a deep depression, feeling sorry for himself and the loss of the life that he had originally planned for himself – a leading Pharisee in the church who would be known for killing off all the Christians. Paul could have pouted, sulked or gotten angry at God. He could have lashed out at others or refused the chance God offered him. And after he became a Christian and a teacher, travelling the world to share this message, Paul could have been disappointed or angry when he was imprisoned time and again. He could have asked, “why me, God?” or “can’t you just get me out of here?” But that was not Paul’s way – in verse 13, he writes, “I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are for your glory.” Not only is Paul at peace with God and his current situation in life – no matter how dangerous, demeaning, demoralizing or difficult - he is also encouraging others not to worry about him, but to find God in their own lives. Where does he find the strength?

Verses 14-19 explain the source of Paul’s hope, his gratitude and his love. These are the most important verses for me this morning: “For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend, together with all the saints, how wide and long and high and deep is the love

of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Paul writes about the power of a proper perspective in life. And this perspective begins on his knees, realizing who created him and all people. The need for strength to face life’s trials is satisfied by the power and Spirit of the Lord, who has an endless wealth of glorious riches to share with us. And this strength is not granted in an outward or physical way, but directly to our inner being when we have the faith to ask Christ to be the ruler of our hearts. When we allow the Lord into our deepest, innermost parts, he grounds us and roots us in his love. Like a tree battered by the storms, we can stand firm because his love is holding us in place. His love is stronger than all the storms – inside and outside of our physical bodies.

One of the greatest mysteries of life and of faith in the Lord is this unconditional, unchanging, no-questions-asked, no-deposit-required, no-input-from us-needed, nothing can separate us from its source LOVE. The children’s song God’s love is deeper than the deepest ocean, wider than the widest sea, higher than the highest mountain – these are gross under-exaggerations of God’s love. How can we accept and understand a love unlike any other kind of love that we experience on this earth; a love that says, I am poured out for you just as you are, no strings attached, you cannot do ANYTHING to deserve me. *(pause)*

If you are anything like me, maybe you like to work to earn your keep – if we work hard for something, then we are entitled to it. If we have earned something, we can claim it, control it, own it, and hold onto it. But we cannot and do not need to hold onto God’s love – it is not going anywhere. God’s love is on constant offer – it never goes out of style or runs off the menu. And we don’t have to do anything to earn it, but to open our hearts and receive it. He is already pouring out his love and blessings on us – we just have to realize his presence and say yes to him.

Yes... and thank you. If you are struggling this morning with saying yes to God, perhaps you will consider beginning to say thank you? As those studies said, giving thanks can make you happier, healthier and more connected. If you are feeling alone in your life, please know that you are NEVER alone. Even when we cannot feel him, God is with us. If we feel out-of-touch with God, maybe saying thank you will help us to connect or reconnect with his love, strength and power.

As I continue to ponder the length, width, height and depth of God's love, my thoughts return to my thank-o-meter – the little experiment that I began a few weeks ago in order to notice God's blessings in a more deliberate way. I have now resumed my experiment and continue to count my blessings every day, day in and day out. And I don't just count them mentally – I have started a journal to remind me of all the things that are going right in myself and in my life. There are days when I am overflowing with gratitude and it is easy to write a long list. And there are days when I stare at the blank page for a long while, struggling to see the things I have to be thankful for. But keeping a journal has helped me to notice all of the joys and blessings in my daily life. And to be honest, I have begun to notice changes – in the way I look at myself and others, in the way I perceive and deal with the situations I encounter every day. Despite difficult trials and burdens, I have begun to feel emotionally happier and physically healthier. Reconnecting to God's love by noticing his blessing reminds me of my "roots" – that God's love will hold me through all the storms. I must not rely on my own strength but his. I must not rely on my own love, but just let his flow through me.

So I would like to challenge us all today – when thinking about the amazing love of God and the healing power of gratitude, take a moment now to remember the last time someone said thank you to you. How did it make you feel? *(pause)*  
And now try to remember the last time you said thank you to someone else. How did **that** make you feel? *(pause)*

As we continue to think about love and gratitude in our own lives, may we give thanks – to one another and to God. May we be aware of and count our blessings – and may this increased awareness of God's blessings begin to connect us more strongly – individually with God, and with one another as a family of believers. And finally, may we all be bold like Paul, going out into the world and our daily lives, living and proclaiming this gospel of thanks and love to a world in desperate need of the message.

AMEN.