

## **“The Grace of Gratitude”**

**1 Samuel 2: 1-5**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

One of the greatest theologians of the last century, Karl Barth said “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.”

I am so glad he said that. You see, after I chose the theme for this sermon, I went to four different theological dictionaries. Not even one of them had a definition for gratitude. Friends, on today’s topic, we are on our own.

Maybe that is saying something about our culture: We need to do some deeper thinking about just how important gratitude is.

I knew a man who had a very successful career and gave it up to become the head of the local food bank. He saw all these people in poverty, he felt called to do something about it. This master communicator would go around raising funds and telling stories of grateful people he encountered. He taught the whole community about gratitude and laughter.

Barth is right: Joy is the simplest form of gratitude. I hope you feel both today. Gratitude is powerful. Gratitude means being thankful. My definition: Gratitude is a catalytic way of seeing and being thankful.

It is catalytic because when you mix gratitude in with existence, life changes. The world has all these mountains, meadows, oceans, beaches, trees, flowers, animals, insects, and all the diversity of human beings. We have everything we need – but it all changes when we take the time to appreciate it. Gratitude changes us: simply being thankful.

There are different states of gratitude. For many people, a life lived in gratitude has a calmness, a quiet joy. I think that sounds beautiful.

It’s just, that’s not my experience at all. My gratitude is lived is like that old radio jingle, where the station announcer says: “Turn it on, Tune it in, turn it up and tear the knobs off.” It’s like what Gertrude Stein said: “Silent gratitude doesn’t mean very much to anyone.” My experience of gratitude let’s everyone know the joy of what is going on in life. We express how life changes when we see the gifts God is giving us.

Gratitude is catalytic: Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. The library of life is open, and we think new thoughts. The refrigerator door of life is open, and it all looks so delicious. With gratitude, the lights go on: it stretches out before us further than the Hubble telescope can see.

*Gratitude catalytically changes us: It turns what we have into enough. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude turns denial into acceptance, Chaos into order, confusion into clarity. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.* (Melody Beattie)

*Rich or poor, we can all be grateful. Like Oprah said: I am grateful for the blessings of wealth, it hasn't changed who I am. My feet are still on the ground. I'm just wearing better shoes. G. K. Chesterton wrote: When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?*

That makes me remember my friend Bob. Bob fought at the Battle of the bulge. Nobody including Bob wanted to fight the war in the deep winter snow. Bob was not grateful for the snow.

In the battle, Bob captured a prisoner. He took away his rifle, but the prisoner had a hidden gun. He shot Bob in the leg. Bob didn't know what else to do, so he stuck his leg in the snow. He lost his leg, but the snow saved his life. Bob sat in the first row in worship every week with this huge smile on his face. He was so grateful for everything. He was grateful to be there.

You know how everybody comes to worship and sits in the same place every week? One Sunday, before I came into the sanctuary, Bob convinced everybody in the congregation to sit on the opposite side of the church – just to mess with my mind. Bob was grateful. His grateful joy changed people around him. Gratitude is catalytic.

Gratitude is the catalytic power of thankfulness where our heart teaches our mind to see. Like Mary Davis said: The more grateful I am, the more beauty I see.

This does not mean life is easy. Life has times and experiences that are exceedingly difficult. Some of those are failures can teach us many things that we really need to learn. You know that saying: "Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again." (F. P. Jones)

Or that otherwise insight: "If at first you don't succeed... skydiving is not for you." Gratitude can help us keep our balance when failures happen. Sometimes, it's as that great philosopher, Anonymous, said: "The harder you fall, the higher you bounce."

There are more difficult times. It seems as if everything we have worked for has been taken away. But by through the eyes of gratitude, it may be one of those times where it clears the path. One of my favorite sayings from Alcoholics Anonymous: "The barn burned down. Now I can see the moon." AA teaches people to be grateful for what they have.

*Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns; I am thankful that thorns have roses.* Alphonse Karr (1808-1890), French novelist

*I find it so moving in times of national tragedy, that strangers from across the street and strangers from across the country drop everything and come to help. Strangers turn into friends. Those who are helped are so grateful for how people have reached out to help. Strangers become friends – gratitude is catalytic. It changes people.*

*It makes me wonder: how we could we help the people in California Who have lost everything in those fires? How can we help them move from devastation to grace? And then, maybe, someday, to gratitude? You see, I don't think gratitude is automatic: but I do believe redemptive love, when applied with passion, may, in time, bring a sense of gratitude.*

“Gratitude opens our eyes. All of a sudden, a grateful heart opens our eyes this multitude of blessings that continually surround us. “ (James Faust)

It becomes a way of living.

A local college put on Thornton Wilder's play, “Our Town” last week. It has that devastating and profound image of Emily speaking beyond the grave, as she looks back at family and friends who do not see the wonder of life around them. She says, "Does anyone ever realize life while they live it...every, every minute?"

Later on, Wilder said, “We can only said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.” Gratitude help us to be alive.

It matters that we practice gratitude. “Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it to anybody.” (William A. Ward)

We take life for granted. Gratitude reveals the rest of reality. We need to be grateful for the big things. Then we need to be grateful for the little things, as gratitude reveals how big they truly are.

Or, as Roy Bennett says, “Be grateful for what you already have.

If you aren't grateful for what you already have, what makes you think you would be happy with more.”

Gratitude has to do with a state of being. We practice being grateful. It strengthens us. It expands our hearts. Recently there was a movie about Winnie the Pooh. I did not go see it. In all candor, I am not a Pooh fan. I had a family member who was a Pooh fanatic. It scarred me. Except I do like one character very much: Piglet. It was about that little fellow that A.A. Milne wrote: “Piglet noticed that even though he had a very small heart, it could hold a large amount of gratitude.” It think gratitude enlarges our hearts, and helps us to experience God's love.

In the Scripture reading today: Hannah has been so abused, kicked around, put down, for years. When she prays, it is one of the angriest prayers in the Bible. Take a look. It reminds me of that saying:

*I want to say thank you to all the people  
who walked into my life and made it outstanding,  
and all the people who walked out of my life  
and made it fantastic.*            Author unknown

Hannah is angry like that. And yet, there is a sense of gratitude that shows God has already begun to turn her life around. Gratitude is redemptive like that. I love this passage, because there are things in life that can make us angry. But Biblical faith realizes, that God's redeeming love can touch us all too. Gratitude heals our angry hearts in surprising ways.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said: "No one achieves success without the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude." Take time to think today about who has helped you be successful in your life. Then reach out and show them your gratitude. It's like William James said: "The deepest craving of human nature is the need to be appreciated." Now is your time.

Albert Schweitzer said: "At times our own light goes out...and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." Be grateful for those, who, in the most difficult times, rekindled the spark of hope within you. Reach out and tell them. Do it today?

Emmerson said: "You cannot do a kindness too soon because you never know how soon it will be too late."

I'd like to end with three quotations from one well-known theologian: "We should certainly count our blessings, but we should also make our blessings count."

"In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."

I have had a remarkable life. I seem to be in such good places at the right time. You know, if you were to ask me to sum my life up in one word: gratitude.

Those quotes all came from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, held in a Nazi concentration camp. Gratitude is a catalyst that changes how we see the world.

I am so grateful to God for all of you. And for this marvelous House of Hope that truly spreads hope in the lives of so many people. I am grateful to you and I want to make sure I say that out loud. You are an inspiring congregation filled with love. Thank you.

Now, I would invite you to stand. And turn to a friend, and say, "I am grateful you are here." And then turn to a stranger, and say, "I am grateful you are here." May that catalyst of gratitude turn strangers into friends, and may it turn your life into an existence blessed by God more and more, each and every day.

Amen.