

As we lean in to the season of Thanksgiving, we are beginning a new sermon series today based on the key points in Diana Butler Bass's book, *Grateful*. We will also explore what the Bible says about giving thanks, and it turns out the Bible says a lot about being grateful. It's a central theme that runs throughout the Bible. As soon as a gift is recognized as being from God, the people immediately offered thanksgiving for that gift. Time and again, it becomes automatic -- Gift and response. God showers gifts, and the people respond with gratitude.

This is actually Bass's suggested structure for gratitude, but this isn't how the world understands gratitude today. Gratitude is mostly understood as appreciation for good news "or thank-you notes or through singing hymns."<sup>1</sup> But, it's much more than that.

True gratitude "guides us to a way of healing and compassion."<sup>2</sup> During the next month, we are invited to see how gratefulness -- or the lack of it -- shapes our lives and how it can transform us into a more grace-filled person. I hope we "become aware of gratitude in new ways, with the hope that if we see more clearly what is at stake, we might together nurture, encourage, and practice the sort of gratefulness that can change our hearts and our communities."<sup>3</sup>

To begin, we must talk about the structures in place that influence how we experience gratitude. Diana Butler Bass explains, "For centuries, Westerners have defined gratitude as a commodity of exchange -- a transaction of debt and duty --

organized around...wealth and power."<sup>4</sup>

There's an exchange -- quid pro quo -- something for something. Someone gives us money or helps us, with strings attached, and we are indebted to them. Someone does us a favor and then we're expected to return the favor sometime in the future.

When gratitude gets caught in a quid pro quo situation, it's not truly gratitude. We may be thankful at first when we are receiving the favor or gift, but then we feel powerless if it is held over our head. The gratitude dissipates when we are asked to pay our debt -- "You owe me," they say, and we feel obligated to return the favor. The opposite of gratitude happens, and we wish we were never in this situation in the first place.

We may actually feel grateful when the whole deal is over, but our feelings of gratitude have changed. When power and obligation, debt and duty, enter the situation, it drives out feelings of gratitude. Only in the gift and response structure, can we truly feel grateful.

The Israelites were thankful for all the gifts God showered upon them in the scripture for today. They were in a state of drought, similar to the dustbowl in the 1930's, but the rains finally came and turned things around. They abundantly received God's grace through new life, food, and drink. God's gift of forgiveness poured upon them, and they were never again disgraced. God's Spirit filled them -- all of them -- no divisions between gender or class. Their despair about present conditions ended, and they began to dream again and see the future where God is taking them.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Prologue xxiv.

The most precious gift is God's salvation. God saved them from drought, famine, and shame, and gave them a new life of abundance. All of this is gift, every part of this story is God's gift to the people. And, they were thankful. They rejoiced in the Lord and praised God for dealing with them so wondrously.

They felt gratitude. It sprang from their hearts because they knew that it was God who saved them and blessed them with abundance. They didn't do anything to earn these gifts and even thought that they were in such dire straits because of their actions against God. They did not feel any sense of entitlement or that they deserved to be saved. So, when they were saved, gratitude for this undeserved and free gift of grace poured from their hearts.

In many of the studies on gratitude, several researchers have said that it's really difficult for middle class Americans to feel true gratitude. We have a sense of entitlement buried within us. We think we deserve certain things because we work for them. We've pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps by our own accord. We've overcome struggles by our perseverance and hard work. We forget that we're interdependent on each other and the earth and on God.

We've turned dependence into a negative thing. My own father told me to never be financially dependent on a man. I understand that he was trying to teach me to be independent, but to be human is to rely on other humans and on God. We're in this life together, mutually dependent on each other. We rely on the farmers to grow our food, and the farmers rely on us to purchase

it. We ask others for help in parenting because it really does take a village to raise a child, and the ones who help, benefit from knowing that child and feeling needed. Those in recovery rarely stay in recovery alone. They need the mutual reliance on each other to stay sober. Our interdependence is actually a gift from God that we share together, and we respond with gratitude.

Gratitude can be a feeling, but because feelings change, especially in a quid pro quo exchange, we don't always trust our feelings. But our feelings can alert us of something we may need to explore that is blocking gratitude. Perhaps we don't feel gratitude when we think we should. Negative feelings like anger, resentment, envy, and "fear cannot coexist in the same space with positive ones like happiness and gratitude."<sup>5</sup> Our brains don't work that way. These negative emotions can alert us of areas where we need healing.

When we become aware of what is blocking gratitude, we can work to have gratitude drive out the negative emotions. We can choose gratitude and we can participate in practices that encourage gratitude, putting us on a path to healing and compassion.

One practice is a gratitude journal, a daily record of the gifts in our lives that we are thankful for. We pay attention to the good things in our lives, and then write down one gift that we are thankful for each day. The journal is an invitation of linking the present moment with gratitude and replacing the negative feelings with positive ones. We don't want it to become a list of material stuff; we should dig deeper into the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 28.

universal gifts that we all share together -- the gift of life itself, the gifts from our shared earth, gifts of love or support in an interdependent community, gifts that we don't earn or have to repay such as God's grace.

During this next month, I invite you to pay attention to the gifts in your life, and write down one gift that you are grateful for each day. There are journals here for you to take. Perhaps you can also explore why you are grateful for that gift. And, if you are just not feeling very grateful, explore what is blocking your gratitude. In this exercise of gratitude, may we recognize the many gifts that God gives us each day and how our hearts and lives can be transformed by responding with gratitude.