

In the first two weeks of this series, we explored our personal understanding of gratitude, and how to create a habit of gratitude to enrich our personal lives. We focused on how we respond personally to God's gifts following the pattern of Gift and Response. Today, we apply this same principle to a group, to a community – our community – and how the community can be transformed if we all practice gratitude. Diana Butler Bass said, “When it comes to gratitude, ‘me’ always leads to ‘we.’”¹ “Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, network of relationships that are mutually reciprocal.”² We all receive the gift of community and respond with gratitude together.

There's a “we” in the scripture for today. God called the Thessalonians together as a community, so they can be part of the early church to spread the gospel message. However, God called them together for other reasons as well. God gave them each other, so they can support each other during their persecution, and so they can experience God's love and grace through their relationships with each other.

God has called us into community just like the Thessalonians. God gives us the gift of community for encouragement and support but also for us to experience Christ through our relationships. We can see the divine's face in each other's face. We feel God's presence through the presence of others. We receive God's forgiveness when we forgive each other. We become the hands and feet of Christ by serving side-by-side in the body of Christ.

Once we realize that this community is a gift from God, we are grateful that we have each other. Gratitude is contagious, and it reciprocates and spreads throughout the community, and ultimately it ripples out into the world.

All too often though, the opposite can happen as well. An ungrateful community is a product of ungrateful people who allow their negativity and ingratitude, their desire for control and power, to poison the community. Our sickness makes the community sick. Our personal sin taints the gift God gives.

Many times, we aren't even aware of the consequences of our actions. We think that whatever is blocking gratitude in us – resentment, jealousy, fear, anger, self-righteousness – only affects us personally. But, me leads to we. Negative emotions are contagious as well. It's Newton's third law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Science is not the only field that teaches this. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun said, “Every word we speak and every action we perform, affects our future... Words and actions come from our mind... And when we indulge in resentment or obsession or self-righteous thinking, we create several problems. First, we suffer the immediate pain and suffering for those thoughts and emotions and often act out in ways that cause others and harm.”³ Me leads to we.

The Bible tells us this in another way: We reap what we sow. We receive what we plant and cultivate. And, since we are not isolated islands in this life, we share

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 97.

² *Ibid.*

³ Pema Chodron, *Welcoming the Unwelcome*, 2019.

life together, then others reap what we sow as well. Just as we reap what others sow. What we do and say affects us and others.

We see this in today's scripture as well. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to stand firm in their faith and hold fast to their community by comforting their hearts and strengthening them in every good work and word. In another version, it says, "in every good thing you do and say" (NLT). No matter the field, this is a universal law.

It's pretty simple, really. If you want to be part of a grateful community, then be grateful. If you don't want to be part of a back-biting negative community, then stop back-biting and being negative. If you notice someone else poisoning the community with gossip and harmful actions, don't participate in it. Talk to them with compassionate words and actions that what they are putting out into the community is changing the community – and not for the better. It is tainting God's gift.

We have the choice and the power to be the community we want to be, to make the most of this God-given gift. We can choose to be sick together, or we can choose to be grateful together. We can cultivate misery, or we can cultivate gratitude. Gratitude emerges from an abiding presence of and trust in God's presence, gifts, and abundance."⁴ If we truly recognize that this community is a gift that God places in our lives, then we trust that God's presence is here, and gratitude emerges because we are thankful to be a part of it.

We respond with our presence in the community, with our participation in the community, and our partnership in the

community. We don't ask you to pay "dues" because it's not a country club nor is it about money. It's about relationships and coming together as partners in this ministry. Everyone has a place here and God-given gifts to use in service to the community. By being present, by participating, by being equal partners, we are responding with gratitude.

"Although we feel grateful as individuals and can develop spiritual practices of gratitude in our personal lives, the deepest experiences of gratitude move us beyond islands of isolation into connection and community."⁵ Me leads to we.

We cultivate gratitude by taking time to think about what or whom we are grateful for in this community. Paul tells us in verse 15: "Stand firm and hold fast." This morning, we will close by participating in a practice that allows us to stand firm in gratitude and hold fast by holding each other in gratitude.

Earlier, I asked you to write down some names of people in this community in which you are grateful for. I invite you to select one of those people from your list. Or, you can recall a time in your life that you were truly grateful for this community. It could be now. It could've been during a crisis in the past. It could be for the prayers offered, food or other gifts given, a group or Bible study that moved you closer to God. There may be many reasons or gifts that you've received from this community, but settle on one right now. I will give you a moment to recall it.

Now, we will do a breathing exercise, in which we all breath in and hold

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, notes from Bishop's Convocation, September 2019.

⁵ Ibid, 100.

our breath for a few moments. While we are holding our breath, I invite you to hold that one thing or person you are grateful for in your mind. Perhaps offer a silent prayer of thanksgiving. We will hold onto gratitude as a community. We will do this several times, holding onto gratitude a little longer each time.

Hold on to gratitude when the future is uncertain. Hold on to gratitude for the people here, especially when your life is fragile. God has brought each of us here in this community to be present with God and with each other, to participate in God's work through the ministries of this church, and to partner with the people God has brought here. Me leads to we. This community is a gift. Let us respond with Gratitude. And, all of God's people said, **Amen.**