

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Joel 2:28;
Matthew 6:33

Rev. Tyler Amundson

November 19, 2017

Extravagant Generosity: Vision and Hope Are Inspirations of the Heart

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving and, no matter our plans for the day, we ‘church folk’ get thanksgiving. We all know gratitude is a good thing. It’s something we begin teaching our children when they are very young. How many times have you sent a child back to a grandma or a friend or an uncle with the instructions *tell them thanks?* How many times have you given a child a cookie and then asked *what do you say?* We want our children to learn what we ourselves have learned. Good manners. And, even more, we want them to learn to be appreciative.

Yet in this holiday season we often get caught up in the drive of our culture to make the season perfect. We can’t have Thanksgiving dinner without buying to excess, so too much food covers our tables. We begin to imagine our chance to buy as much as possible on Black Friday or Cyber Monday. Suddenly our sense of thanks goes out the window and we begin looking for ‘more.’

What if we imagined our thanksgiving meal in a different way, what if we went back to thanking in a simple way. Today I want to share with us a video that invites us to do just that:

- <http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/55745/thanksgiving-table>

This video is true, isn’t it? Even though we know gratitude is good, sometimes we talk ourselves out of it. Because, you see, in a sense, to be grateful is to acknowledge we have a need. Gratitude assumes an ability to recognize that we are not self-sufficient. We have needs, desires – some of which can only be filled by someone else handing us

that support. In other words, we are dependent on others and the only proper response to the gift of another's care is ... *thanks*.

In a recent article of the United Methodist Interpreter, the following story was shared by Kent Millard the President of United Theological Seminary:¹

Millard traces his devotion to gratitude to his youth. The son of an alcoholic, he was nonplussed and deeply grateful when a United Methodist church in South Dakota welcomed him, his family and his formerly alcoholic father when his dad dried out and decided the family must go to church.

Practicing the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous, Millard's father had acknowledged his powerlessness over his addiction to alcohol. Walking on the South Dakota prairie, his father said to himself, "I just wish there was a power that could save me" from this addiction.

"Then he felt it," Millard says. "He felt the presence of God around him like a bright light."

Where Millard lived, everyone knew his dad had a drinking problem. Yet that didn't stop that Methodist church from embracing his family. Millard was only 11.

"I didn't know much about God or Jesus but I liked the church people because they accepted an alcoholic and his family," he says. "I realized you come to church to say thank you to God for what he has already done. Gratitude is at the heart of Christian faith."

¹ <http://www.interpretermagazine.org/topics/living-in-gratitude>

This is what Jesus is talking about in our first scripture today, he is reminding us as disciples of Christ, and followers of God's love of unending forgiveness and reconciliation to remember why we share our gratitude and thanks. It is for the dream of a place where all will be welcomed to experience God's love and grace. A kingdom, a place that we desire, and in which all will have enough.

Our first scripture today comes from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 6:33 Common English Bible (CEB)

³³ Instead, desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Did you know the practice of passing the offering plate hasn't always been a part of the Christian church? Until the first half of the 19th century in the United States the churches were still funded by religious taxes levied by the states. This was done under the notion that any modern state required a properly educated and socially minded society to exist and function. The churches would fill that role because that is how most of the early citizens had seen this happen in Europe. This changed by 1833, when Massachusetts became the last state to rescind their religious tax. The churches suddenly had to find new ways of funding their ministry. One of the first ways was to sell pews. Each family or person would buy a pew and the rental fees would cover the churches expenses. This worked well for those who slept in and arrived late. You couldn't sit in someone's seat unless they said it was ok, because they owned it. The practice of renting pews has obvious challenges and it did not lead to a very good practice of welcoming people to church.

Eventually the practice of passing the offering plate would become the main practice in the church. This practice was begun under the teaching of the tithe from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. The tithe is listed in several places, but it primarily says give a certain amount of

your earnings to the priesthood, the temple, and those in poverty(children and widows). Passing the plate was meant to be a spiritual practice, not a burden. By passing the plate it was a hope that people would give of their gifts to help support a church sharing God's work in the world.²

The practice of tithing is the root lesson behind Jesus' message in our gospel reading. Jesus is attempting to speak to the fact that sharing gifts should not be done to gain favor with God, but done because we know God can do amazing things when we share our gifts. Jesus is trying to ensure that everyone knows that God loves them, and giving is just a practice of participating in God's dream by sharing our resources in this world. Not only that, when we share our first fruits, the first in gratitude for what we have it embodies a practice that will open us more to what God is doing in abundance in our world.

The well-known author Allen Cohen says, "Gratitude, like faith, is a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it grows, and the more power you have to use it on your behalf. If you do not practice gratefulness, its benefaction will go unnoticed, and your capacity to draw on its gifts will be diminished. To be grateful is to find blessings in everything. This is the most powerful attitude to adopt, for there are blessings in everything."

He is not wrong, psychologists have done significant research around gratitude and I love when Jesus and science have the same findings. Psychologists had teenagers keep gratitude journals in which they wrote each day things they were grateful for. Another control group kept things that annoyed them. The ones who kept a journal of gratitude found more energy, enthusiasm, and even attention in their lives.

Gratitude is found to connect us to the things that keep us healthier by making us more apt to engage in exercise and getting enough sleep.

² <http://www.youtube.com/embed/N2-jl2IZRJ0?autoplay=1&rel=0&vq=hd720>

People who practice gratitude are found to have less depression, and also it is found to allow the reward neurotransmitter in our brain work better. All of this allowing those who practice gratitude to live as I believe Jesus called his disciples to live, present and available to love and serve those they found in each moment.³

Jesus was basing all of this on the tithe understanding, which is not a tax, but an opportunity to share our first fruits of gratitude with God and the world.

The great preacher, Adam Hamilton as a part of a series called enough, shares a great example of first fruits giving. He lays out 9 red apples and one yellow apple. Adam Hamilton picks up the yellow apple and shares that this is an example of our first fruit giving.

He continues:

“100% of what we have is God’s gift to us and for us to use in our lives.

The idea of tithing is that God asks us for 10% for God’s purposes, this is the Christian practice.”

“10% is pretty attractive though, its our first fruits and sometimes looks like the best fruits.”

As he shares this he takes bites of the yellow apple and says things like, “Then the medical bills come in, or I could just get that car with better features for a few more dollars a month, or I could get that student loan paid off two years earlier if I just didn’t give. Maybe we could even get the new flat screen for the Super Bowl.”

Adam Hamilton then sets the core of the apple on the church altar.

³ <https://playtherapycolorado.com/the-brain-on-gratitude/>

Facts and the quote on gratitude were found in this great article that is well referenced and connects to more resources on gratitude.

When we take from this first fruit, the 10% we give to God is only a core, or even less.

Almost every income level can find a way to give at 10%. However, it can be daunting if we have never given before. Starting at 5% and then working up can be an important step. Maybe you can give 8% next year and then make your way up to 10%.

And the tithe is the floor, not the ceiling. God calls us to generosity to see where our own wealth can be shared. Maybe we can find a way to work up to sharing beyond the 10% with the mission project, school, church projects, or another non-profit. Our generosity affects God's vision for our world and us. The more we can work to share with our neighbors in smart and effective way, the more we help God to grow places to share God's love.

From the earliest times people worshipped God by building an altar and sharing their first fruits. In ancient times it was a burnt animal or grain that was a sacrificed to God expressing gratitude, devotion and desire to honor God. The scent was said to be pleasing to God. It was not that God loved the smell of burnt grain or animal, but rather God saw that the people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith and a desire to honor God and the love God was sharing with people. When given in this spirit, we move the heart of God with our gifts, and we bless God.

Our second scripture today, comes from the prophet Joel. It is one of the core scripture for Shiloh that we pass as we enter the doors, a scripture inscribed on a rock to remind us our purpose every time we come to church.

Joel 2:28 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁸ After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.

I have a colleague and friend in ministry who serves a church in Denver. Part of their ministry is going to Civic Center park each day and serving lunches, clothing, supplies, and communion to the homeless of Denver. My friend's name is Jerry Hersh and his church is called After Hours Denver.

Jerry tells this story:

One day they were serving lunches in the park. Jerry was standing at the communion table and sharing it with people as they came by. It was a busy day and the lunches and supplies they had went very quickly. Others serving were cleaning up to leave and handed him one final sandwich which he placed on the table, right next to the communion elements.

If you have never been to Civic Center park in Denver it is big. It has old trees covering a large section of land, and all of it is surrounded by the city's noise and towering architecture.

As Jerry finished serving communion to one person, he looked up. On the other side of the park he could make out a young man running toward him. He could tell the young man was headed toward him, so he held out the sandwich sitting on the table. As the young man got closer, and arrived out of breath, Jerry said, "Sorry man, we are out of water and lunches, all I have is this sandwich."

The young man looked at the sandwich and waved it off saying, "No, I already ate lunch."

Taking another deep breath, he asked, "Can I still take communion?"

Today I am going to ask you to do 2 things as you take communion here at Shiloh. One, I want you to pray in your heart to find one new practice of gratitude or thankfulness this week. It can be as small as saying a simple prayer of gratitude in the morning, "Thank you God for this day."

It might be inviting your family to say grace at each meal as a way of giving thanks. It might be changing how you give financially or of your time in the next year. Big or small each step of gratitude strengthens our hearts for the carrying the dreams of God.

Second, I want you to take out those cards in your bulletins. I would invite you to write a vision or hope you have for Shiloh as a community, something you hope we can share with the world. Let it be a dream that ties to the radical gratitude we learned from Kent Millard at the beginning or from the young man Jerry met in the park, of how our church might create space for people to grow in faith, love and generosity to carry Christ's vision of the world for God.

May you this week feel God's presence in your gratitude acts, may you know each act of gratitude strengthens us to carry more visions and stories of hope, and may you know God loves you wherever you are on this journey. God, our God loves and laughs with each grateful act we take part in and when God laughs dreams are born.

Amen