

THANKS BE TO GOD!
COLOSSIANS 1:1-11, LUKE 1:68-79
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon White
November 24,2019

I saw a video this week which was made by a church in Charlotte, NC in anticipation of the Christmas holiday season. It's gone viral. Thank you to Meg Campbell for having shared it. It takes place on what looks like a Christmas morning. A man is in his bed wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper. His hand rips off the paper, showing an exuberant face...."Oh, I'm alive!" Then he reaches over to his wife...and rips open the package surrounding her..."Christine oh...I love you!" Two children come in the room...wrapped in Christmas paper...you get the gist. Then he goes into the bathroom...a bow is on the light switch. He flips it on and is joyfully surprised. "Honey, the power works!" The same with the water, as he reaches for the faucet which has a bow on it..."And we have clean water!" It continues on with food, a briefcase (signifying he has a job)and a car and everything else...all to make a point that we often overlook the little things which are huge things for so many. We have much for which to be grateful...if we'll just see it and recognize it. It's clever, and it's obviously hitting a chord with people.

Giving thanks. It's important, isn't it? Giving thanks is life-giving and it's life transforming.

This past Thursday, WPC member Janet Johnson, who serves as Executive Director of Stay at Home in Wilton, asked me to come and give the opening prayer for their annual Thanksgiving luncheon held here in our Lounge. I happily told her I would, as it is an opportunity to spend a little time with some of the seniors who live in our town. Following my own family's tradition, I asked them to join me in standing around in a circle, (or sitting, in some cases) and name one thing for which they are grateful. As we went around, and people shared, their faces lit up as they expressed gratitude for families far and near, for their spouses...many of whom had shared well over 50 years, for the Stay at Home in Wilton group of people, who had become like family to them, for health, for the town, and more. I watched their whole demeanors change when speaking of the people and things for which they were grateful. In fact, I witnessed an energy shift in the room as we held hands and we heard the thanks expressed. There was a marked shift in the excitement as we went from person to person. The love and laughter expressed left all of us with hearts a little more open. We had some giggles too, as two of the husbands in the room said they were thankful for the most beautiful women in the room...their spouses. My heart melted. Thank you, Janet, for the important work you do with that group. Several of our members have served as past presidents of that wonderful organization which helps seniors stay in their homes as they age, if they desire to do so.

We all KNOW that giving thanks and expressing gratitude is important. It makes us feel good too, but in preparation for this sermon I decided to do a little research to see what scientific studies are currently being done to prove its effects.

I came across one out of Berkeley in 2017 done with college students. Researchers there were looking at ways to enhance mental health for those seeking psychological counseling. They pointed to studies which adhered to the belief that “those who count their blessings tend to be happier and less depressed.” In their clinical study, they found evidence that practicing gratitude helped not only those who were relatively adjusted to life, but also those who “had low levels of mental health.” The activity for 300 people in the study went like this: the first group was instructed to write one letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks; the second group was asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about negative experiences; and the third group did not do any writing activity.

As you might imagine, those who wrote the letters of gratitude reported feeling better than those who focused on the negative or who did nothing at all. But interestingly, those who had written the letters of gratitude were still experiencing the positive effects on their mental health **12 weeks later**. As researchers dug deeper, they found these 4 things:

1. **Gratitude unshackles us from toxic emotions:** When you write about how grateful you are to others and how much other people have blessed your life; it might become considerably harder for you to ruminate on your negative experiences.
2. ***Gratitude helps, even when you don't share it.*** Those who wrote and sent the letters received just as much benefit as those who didn't actually send their letters. Sometimes writing without the feel that another will read it gives further freedom.
3. ***Gratitude's benefits take time.*** After practicing gratitude for a while, an energy shift begins to take place. Researchers said that when it does, there is a positive snowball effect on our beings, and we reap the benefits over a longer period of time.
4. ***Gratitude has lasting effects on the brain.*** They actually used scanners (an fMRI) scanner to measure brain activity while people from each group did a “pay it forward” task. In that task, the individuals were regularly given a small amount of money by a nice person, called the “benefactor.” This benefactor only asked that they pass the money on to someone if they felt grateful. Their participants then decided how much of the money, if any, to pass on to a worthy cause (and they did in fact donate that money to a local charity). Researchers then rated how grateful people felt if and when they gave and how people felt guilty if they didn't. They found when people felt more grateful, their brain activity was distinct from brain activity related to guilt and the desire to help a cause. More specifically, they found that **when people who are generally more grateful gave**

more money to a cause, they showed greater neural sensitivity in the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain area associated with learning and decision making. This suggests that people who are more grateful are also more attentive to how they express gratitude.

That research was fascinating to me, but I must admit it left me feeling a little flat. I wondered, ***sure it's great to be grateful...but grateful for what and grateful to whom?***

The importance of expressing gratitude bears out in what I've learned, not in seminary per se, but in 12 step programs for over 3 decades: gratitude is at the core of the program: practicing it, expressing it, cultivating it. For those of us who have had issues with substances, we are taught that we do not have the luxury of being resentful, or self-pitying. In fact, it kills, because dwelling in toxicity leads back to using substances again. Working the 12 steps is a way to detach from all of the past and present baggage so that a sense of gratitude may be experienced. **Gratitude to God for sobriety.**

So, what does all of this have to do with a sermon on this 23rd day of November in the liturgical year on a day known as the celebration of the Reign of Christ?

The scriptures for today basically sum up who Christ is to us. It's the wrap to the saga we've been following since this time last year. Next week, we start the story all over again, in a different Gospel writer's voice. We've been hearing from Luke all year. Next week, we restart the story from Matthew's perspective.

But when you think about it, much of the scriptures are in a sense love letters to us from God...from our God who created us and all of the earth; God who carefully orders our life together in community—even in the difficult times; God who leads us through times of repentance when we have strayed; God who heals, nurtures, and renews us; God who is a sounding board for all of our human woes; God who makes a way for us, even when we think there is no way; God who came to us in the form of the human and divine Jesus to show us how God wants us to live; God who gives us the ultimate redemption in eternal life; God who desires to be in relationship with us as we are still on this earth to be bringers of light and love to others—to be co-creators of peace and justice and joy.

Listen again to these words from Luke:

“By the tender mercy of God, the dawn will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:78-79

And Paul's words to the Colossians:

“May you be made strong with all of the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” Col. 1:11

I don't know how those words fall upon your ears and seep into your being? Are you filled with gratitude? Because, while it may be good and important to be grateful for health and family and running water...if it weren't for the grace of God and God's love for us, there wouldn't be anything else. There' wouldn't be meaning and purpose. Life would be temporal.

The Psalmist says: *In God we live and move and have our being.*

Without God, we are nothing, we have nothing. But in God, we are blessed beyond measure. Thanks be to God!

Let us state what we believe in the words of the Brief statement of Faith...