

SOWING GRATITUDE, HARVESTING BLESSINGS:

Framing Everything In Gratitude

Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9

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Remember our theme? Sowing gratitude, which leads to giving, which leads to a harvest of blessings. Karl Barth wrote that gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightening [*Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, p. 41].

So let's take a brief tour through these two great texts. First, Psalm 100. It reminds us that worship involves movement (physical and spiritual). Words like "come, enter" show us that. It's a processional song. Notice that we occasionally ask you to come, to move physically to demonstrate movement of the heart (like bringing our stewardship commitment cards to the altar). You see, our faith in God is to be very experiential. Fred Craddock once said the greatest journey are the inches from our heads to our hearts. Verse 3 says, "Know!" Not intellectually nod. Know by experience. We all have some head knowledge about God, creeds, church membership, that Jesus was a really cool guy. But to experience by faith, a trusting relationship.

And v. 3 also contains that great theme: God made us. We did not make ourselves. Remember? Lightening brings thunder. Grace brings gratitude. I note with interest that the words about giving thanks in Psalm 100 are commands, not suggestions. God doesn't want us depending on our moods. We don't give thanks if we feel like it; we give thanks until we feel like it!

And so just as our giving should be a discipline, not tied to the whims of emotions, so our giving should be the same. When it comes to this time of year, I love to quote the late Henri Nouwen, who once described the work of fundraising as "proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate in our vision and mission." That seems particularly timely with our Imagine If process, as we dream God's dream and invite each other to "buy in."

And a spirit of gratitude is the key to joyful giving. A recently published book, *The Paradox of Generosity*, by Smith and Davidson, deals with this. The authors conducted large national studies as well as congregational surveys. They discovered generous people are generally healthier, happier and have a greater sense of purpose in life...and satisfaction in life. Generosity actually fosters positive emotions because it can trigger chemical systems which heighten pleasure and reduce stress. I remember an interview I once heard on TV. An energy and fitness trainer said it is physiologically impossible to be both thankful and stressed at the same time!

And speaking of framing everything in gratitude, our Philippians text invites us to see the Apostle Paul in prison, yet refusing to be derailed by circumstances or any prison bars (v. 4). How about you? Notice in v. 6 that thanksgiving is always the way to frame our praying (cf.

Psalm 100). Do you take time to thank God for specific blessings or just jump in to your Christmas list?

As I think of v. 6, there is an old hymn we sing, "Oh what peace we often forfeit; oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." Read v. 7. But to expand that thought, think how much time we focus on things we cannot change and how little time on what we can (our hearts, attitudes). Listen to Paul's words in *The Message* in vv. 8-9: "...you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble...compelling, gracious---the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse..."

And here's a little household tip: When we practice gratitude, we not only make ourselves less miserable; we also make it less miserable for others to be around us! Sometimes I just stink as a friend, co-worker and spouse. When I get negative and ungrateful, I'm just not a very good Jesus advertisement!

A couple of years ago, on New Year's Eve, my daily devotional reading happened to be from James 4, where James warns us that life is fleeting, like a vapor (4:14). Later in the same book, we are encouraged not to complain (5:9). And as I took stock at the end of the calendar year, I sort of put those together for the first time. Life goes fast, so why give in to those "time eaters" like complaining? Why waste our time with our heads turned backwards with regret, anger and resentment? Or with ingratitude? The place for us to be is in right now, at the foot of the Cross, overwhelmed with gratitude, with the love of God in Christ pouring down on us.