

LOOKING OUT WITH GRATITUDE

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, February 23, 2020)

The divine gratitude within me greets and honors the divine gratitude within each of you.

Friends, let me begin by asking you, how did you begin the day this morning? Was it a mechanical beginning, the same as every other morning with the alarm clock jarring you awake? Did you lie quietly listening to the noise of the household, the traffic, the silence, the wind? Did the coffee smell good if it was on? Was the air cool and fresh that flowed into the room from the window? Did you grumble at the aches in your body? Did you awake worried about what the day may hold? I wonder, how many of us woke this morning feeling grateful for the gift of breathing and for the amazing grace that touches each of us every moment of every day? I wonder, how many of us awoke with praise on our lips expressing our thankfulness to the universe, to God, to life for family, friends, and strangers who may yet become friends? How did you begin your day?

When you came to church today what did you notice? Did you notice, was the sky cloudy or clear blue? Were the trees barren or snow-covered? Did you notice a jack rabbit scurrying across the road?

So often we move through the day with little awareness of all the beautiful scenes we pass by every day. Or we move through life taking our lives and the lives of others for granted, going about our day as if everything that we have, and experience is as it should be with little thought of being grateful for a life rich with blessings.

This is the last week of the Wonder-Full Life series. Perhaps I am grateful for this because it has been both a challenging and delightful series, focusing on the tough subject of money. I have invited and encouraged this community into some honest reflection about your money practices and how they align with your faith and values that inspire you to “invest” your time, talent, and resources in generous ways and with deep

gratitude for all that makes for a Wonder-Full life. We close the series by considering how we can transform our lives, the lives of others, and our community with gratitude that informs our acts of sharing.

The other day I saw a church sign that said, “Gratitude turns what we have into enough.” This point was powerfully articulated in the movie that the series is named after, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. As many of us know, the central character is George Bailey, a kind and considerate man who looks out for the well-being of his family, friends and neighbours in his community. George works tirelessly to help people acquire homes, find jobs, and live with some sense of financial security. But along the way, he loses sight of his dreams, his values and his sense of gratitude. He loses these to the negative power and pull of the economic monetary system that seems to be against him at every turn.

At the darkest moment in his life, when all seems hopeless, an encounter with an angel helps George to re-awaken gratitude in his heart, enabling him to realize that what he had in his life, his family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors was enough. All the other things he deemed important were not as important as he had thought. George found his heart again, that wonderful, grateful heart that cared so deeply for others.

The end of the movie is a joyful celebration of community, generosity, and gratitude and George Bailey’s thankfulness is infectious. George returns home realizing that he had not lost everything that he truly valued, and his heart bursts with gratitude. Later the entire community arrives at his home excited to make donations to enable George’s business to survive. George’s brother, Harry, proclaims this:

(Voice of Harry Bailey and Clarence heard but not seen)

Voice of Harry Bailey: “A toast....to my big brother George. The richest man in town.

Reader: And the angel, Clarence, who had earlier declared:

Voice of Clarence: “You see, George, you really had a wonderful

life.”

Reader: George’s little daughter picks up a book lying on a big pile of money and she opens the front cover. The inside inscription reads:

Voice of Clarence: “Remember, no [one] is a failure who has friends!”

The community’s infectious generosity rises out of the gratitude they felt for George, a person who fought on their behalf against the powers of greed and control.

Clarence the angel finally gets his wings and a bell rings, a sign that the reverberations of gratitude were being felt in heaven as on earth.

What the movie teaches us is that when we cultivate relationships in our lives, when we invest our love, support, understanding, and resources in the well-being of our families, our friends, our faith communities or other communities the more our own hearts grow in love and gratitude.

Generosity begets generosity. Generosity begets gratitude. At the heart of relationships is living and giving with gratitude – whether the assets we give are monetary, or our own capital of time and energy for the sake of the human family. When we align our resources, material and non-material, with love, hope, and the well-being of others in mind, we cannot help but be blessed by what we cultivate and what we get in return. The early Christian communities understood the importance of investing in and caring for their communities.

The first Christians embodied a deep sense of thankfulness to God. They believed that the Creator gave creation to them to use for the good of one another and they heeded the words of the ancient prophets who taught about forgiving debts to ensure that there were no needy among the people. The early Christian communities engaged a communal practice of selling everything and ensuring that everyone had equal access to resources. They lived a faith that demonstrated gratitude as the life-force

of the community and such gratitude invited the kind of communal living in which no one was left out, no one felt alone, and no one feared for their well-being. This is the true richness of a wonder-full life.

We may wonder at the companionship and hospitality the followers of Jesus extended to everyone in all walks of life...including whether people “had it all” or didn’t have “two pennies to rub together.” The early Christian communities envisioned and practised an alternative lifestyle to the existing economic structures. They lived the values of generosity and gratitude in their communities. By “investing” in the well-being of the community, all who belonged felt an enduring sense of hope and gratitude.

In the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” we see the power of gratitude that arises when people look out for one another: gratitude is a feeling that is ignited deep within a person’s heart not only by another person’s kind act but also by our own attention, awareness, understanding, and openness to seeing how our individual money practices, our time, our energy, and wisdom can transform the lives of others and the world. Gratitude can have an enormous impact on our entire relationship to life.

I invite you to spend a few minutes in conversation with each other considering two questions, “How do you experience gratitude, and how do you express gratitude?”

CONCLUSION

Throughout the series we have started our prayer time with photos taken by people in this community that represent for them what makes for a wonder-full life. We have seen how blessed we are by the incredible beauty of nature, the love and support of a church family, and the precious interactions of family and friends.

As we end this series let us embrace the essence of gratitude within our individual lives and within this community of faith. William Blake said, “Gratitude is heaven itself. Make this a day of enormous gratitude. Smile often. Say thank you regularly. Give praise, love, and kindness lavishly.

Hug bearishly. Listen generously. Then look back at the end of the day at the pieces of heaven you have created.”

May gratitude empower us to unlock the secrets of a wonder-full life; to believe that what we have is enough, turn denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion to clarity, to turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. May this be so for us all. Amen.