



# Thankfull

## Week 1

Brian Mattson - 11/10/2024

Did you all know we only have three weeks of the year left? I know it seems crazy, and incorrect, but the life of the Church is based on a different calendar. It's one where Advent marks the beginning of the year. Advent, the season to prepare and wait for Christmas, is the start, and right now, these final three weeks of November, mark the end of the year. It's a little shift in our minds, but I love that this typically means we get to end the "year" by focusing on gratitude at Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving has moved up my list of favorite holidays over the years. When I was a kid I loved Christmas, Halloween, and Easter. Those were the big three to me because you got presents and candy. In my teens, I still loved Christmas, but Independence Day was number two because of fireworks. In my twenties, I loved all holidays equally if I got to get out of work, including Memorial Day and Labor Day. And now, I have to admit, I just love Thanksgiving. It might even be number two on my list. It has the best of everything. It's the most food-forward holiday. A lot of people get multiple days off work (sorry to all you retail and online shopping workers!). There are parades, family time, football, and it's the calm before the storm of the Christmas season.

One of my favorite parts of Thanksgiving is that it doesn't have a whole season of busy-ness related to it. We don't generally go all out in

Thanksgiving decorations. We don't get invites to dozens of Thanksgiving parties. There is one day to gather with family or friends. There is a meal that may take a good bit of work, but we almost always build a nap into the day too. For most of us Thanksgiving is a slower day, which means we can relax...once the dishes are done.

I love that this is a slower holiday, but I don't want to relax so far that I forget it is a day that invites us to do something. It's a day that invites us into gratitude - into giving thanks. And, true gratitude needs some time and attention to grow. We are an easily distracted and over-scheduled people nowadays. Our phones and streaming services have rendered our attention spans to microscopic levels, and we tend to find ourselves saying *as soon as we get through this week, things will slow down*. But let's be honest... things aren't slowing down.

The instant gratification we get from social media, and the dopamine hits that keep us coming back, mean our moments of thankfulness are fleeting. Furthermore, we have become thankful for fast food drive-thrus, the ability to skip commercials, and grocery delivery services. Our calendars just won't allow for down time or relaxing nights at home. Is this the recipe for a happy life? Is this the kind of life that is one of abundance or is it one of consumption?

My contention is that a lot of the happiness that bubbles up in the craziness of this modern life is short lived as well. We all experience those joyful moments with our kids, families, or friends. But is it something we are always chasing? Do we just add more and more things to our calendars and collect and accrue more stuff because we think that will make us happy? I think that is definitely part of this imbalanced equation.

We all have heard stories of celebrities who seem to have everything anyone could ever need, but real happiness is elusive. Maybe you know someone who seems to have life together and their house is filled with the finer things,

but they struggle to find happiness too. It's a common refrain from people who go on international mission trips to third world countries: "the people were just so happy and thankful for what they have."

The people who traveled to these places can't believe how happy the people they met seemed... sometimes without running water, consistent electricity, or even wi-fi! What do we think is the source of *that* kind of happiness? Surely it's not more stuff or more events on the calendar. My contention is that this kind of happiness is a direct result of gratitude. I saw a TED Talk recently where the presenter said, "It is not that happiness makes us grateful, but gratefulness that makes us happy." I concur.

Giving thanks is a constant theme in scripture. Many Psalms focus on thanksgiving, and several New Testament authors spend time encouraging their audience to be thankful and grateful. And these exhortations to show some gratitude are not a hollow plea to be thankful because, hey, it could be worse. No, they are urges to focus more of our attention to the positive parts of our lives in an effort to instill happiness. Gratitude is the foundation for so much of our faith. And with gratitude, we are compelled to respond. Listen to these words from Psalm 100, *A Psalm of Thanksgiving*.

**Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.**

**Worship the LORD with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.**

**Know that the LORD is God.**

**It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.**

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.**

**Give thanks to him, bless his name.**

**For the LORD is good;**

**his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.**

This Psalm, a communal call to thanksgiving in poetic form is a reminder to make the main thing the main thing. You are one of God's innumerable sheep, yet God knows each of us personally. Ours is a God who is good. Our God's love is strong, holding onto each of us forever. Never failing. And because of those truths, we proclaim our thanks and praise in response.

*The Message* translates that third stanza this way.

**Enter with the password: "Thank you!"  
Make yourselves at home, talking praise.  
Thank him. Worship him.**

I love the straightforwardness of *The Message* translation. If I could assume a little artistic freedom with this stanza, I think the subtext is basically asking this question: *Do you feel like you are on the outside of God's Kingdom? You already know the password. This is your kingdom. This house is your house. Make yourself at home. When you choose a grateful heart, praise will spring forth.*

The problem is, sometimes in life, summoning a grateful heart is daunting. Maybe that's why people have to be constantly reminded that thankfulness is one of the foundations of life over and over again in scripture. We are forgetful creatures, aren't we? I've heard it said in regards to marriages that you have to choose your spouse everyday. Yes, there is probably a strong connection to them already, but it's an active choice each day to commit.

I believe it works the same way with being thankful. Gratitude is a spiritual practice that is developed and strengthened through repetition. We need to work every day on making gratitude our primary posture and focus. Because if we don't actively choose our focus, something or someone else will choose for us. The latest video or news story will pop up, and like a breath, thankfulness will come and go, replaced by worry or fear or our to-do lists.

John Wesley had a practice with early Methodists. We still carry it with us today. Regularly, at my meetings with mentors or conferences with other pastors, our time starts with the question, "How is it with your soul?" True, it's

a very churchy way to ask about the spiritual health of colleagues, but the heart of this question is to allow for some deeper introspection. We could simply ask, "How are you doing?" and expect a simple, small talk answer. But by asking *how is it with your soul?*, we are encouraging each other to dig a little deeper. We are letting the other person know we are listening and setting time aside to engage in introspection with them.

Lori had a similar strategy of helping people dig a little deeper. She would end meetings or studies with the question, "Where have you seen God lately." And by asking that, she created space for people to focus on their spiritual lives. You could just watch people sit back and take stock of things over the past week or month, and by zooming out just a little bit, people could see through the commotion and craziness of life and notice the little moments where God shone through the clutter.

This type of reflection doesn't necessarily bubble up naturally in this crazy world. We need to be reminded to look past our current distractions, however hard it can be at times. And this is definitely one of those times.

Election years always consist of more distractions than usual. Presidential election years means you can go ahead and double that. So it may be hard for you, for many of us, to focus on something else. Anything else. I'm not here to tell you to quit fretting over these election results. I'm not here to tell you to quit celebrating either. What I am doing is reminding you all that basically 50 percent of America is happy and 50 percent are sad, angry, or scared. Now is not the time to gloat, nor is it time for any apocalyptic soothsaying. We don't know what's going to happen. We may be holding tightly to hopes or fears today, but we do not know. We can let that space of not knowing determine our focus, or we can choose it.

When I pulled into work on Wednesday, in a fog from staying up until 3am watching the news, I noticed a woodpecker right outside my windshield on the trunk of a tree. It was quickly moving around, going about life, addressing

the issues of the day. I was lost in my own thoughts before, thinking about the people in my life who woke up on Wednesday absolutely crushed by the election results. I thought about people in my life celebrating the news, hopeful that in their jubilation, they can remember to weep with those who weep as well. And as I watched that woodpecker skittering about, I couldn't help but think of the ways I was thankful. I was thankful for the little things in life. Thankful for the ways the world continues to turn. Thankful for the ways creation moves forward, regardless of our current events. And like that woodpecker, the next steps for me are not to wallow or become stagnant, but to get on with the work of loving the people around me.

I'm thankful today. I'm thankful that the call on my life is to be the very real hands and feet of Christ to the people around me. I'm thankful for the big things like family, friends, shelter, food. I'm also thankful for the itty bitty things like a new pair of shoes, the chill in the air, and woodpeckers scurrying about. To be thankful is to find some sense of contentment. Which doesn't mean pretending like the hard things of life aren't real, or that they're minimal. It means putting an "and" at the end of our sentences. I am afraid of what's to come AND I'm grateful for all I have in my life that will help me face it. I am sad that I have lost something or someone dear to me AND I am so grateful that I had them to begin with. I'm disillusioned that people don't seem to love in the way I thought they would AND I am grateful that God does. Without fail. It's not that making space for gratitude cancels out the crises of our lives, it's that it helps to keep things in perspective. Two things can be true at once. Our response to all we have been given can be to praise God for this gift of life. And in our praise, we find ourselves inviting others into this flock. Our gratefulness is the engine that brings forth kindness, empathy, mercy, and generosity.

What are you thankful for today? For some of you, this may be a hard question to answer. That's okay. Grief will take its time. Whatever the source of your grief. The church we are today is the church we were last week -

when we made the whole service a space for grief. But in that space we reminded ourselves of these words from Jesus in Matthew, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the one most dear to you."

We can grieve, but we do not get stuck in grief. We move through and with grief. So, when you're ready maybe start by taking a second to just say thank you for what you do have. However small it might be. And with each tiny bit of thanks and praise you can muster, more is on the way.

If you are one who is experiencing gratitude more easily this week, I hope you will continue cultivating it. And, let's remind ourselves that when we have more than what we need, we can always choose to share with someone else. Maybe an act of love and kindness from you could be a spark to someone else's gratitude.

Living life with a foundation of gratitude is not a seasonal thing or something to be remembered only on a national holiday. It is a daily thing. A spiritual practice. A jumping off point.

In order to make it a more regular part of our lives, we do set aside these few weeks at the end of our church calendar to make space for thankfulness. So we're inviting ourselves to take a breath, to relax. And with that space make room to be reminded of the abundance of blessings we have. Not as a way to mask our trouble, but to have gratitude be part of the foundation we stand on to face our troubles. My prayer is that we can end this year of the church calendar with gratitude, and by choosing to be thankful, the year ahead is one where the Kingdom of God is made all the more real by our tangible love to the people around us.