

# Attitude of Gratitude

A sermon by the Rev. Denise Clapsaddlle

## Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.  
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.  
The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

There was a Lutheran pastor who lived near us when I was growing up, and he came to our church and preached a wonderful sermon one week. It was called "Attitude of Gratitude" or "Gratitude for Attitude" or something like that. We thought it was great, and when we heard his church was feeling frustrated with him a few years later we asked why, saying he had come to our church and preached this great sermon. Then we described it to them, because we hadn't forgotten it. And the people from the Lutheran church said, "Yeah, trying listening to that sermon every week."

There are a couple of old sayings about sermons. One is that the best sermons are sermons you preach to yourself. If my sermons are any good at all, it's because I really feel I need preaching to. And the other saying is that pastors only have one sermon. There is something to that, too--we tend to keep returning to the same themes that we find compelling, the message of the gospel that resonates most with us.

If you were to have only one sermon, a sermon on developing an attitude of gratitude wouldn't be a bad one to have. Even today, less than a week from thanksgiving, I bet it's easy for each of us to catalog our dissatisfaction. We get frustrated about everything from the size of our stomach (too big) to the size of our bank account (too small). Our spouse isn't tidy enough. Our kids break our rules and don't even seem to feel guilty about it. We don't have a place to put all of our relatives on thanksgiving. It goes on and on. Dissatisfaction comes naturally. Gratitude comes less naturally. The point of this Lutheran pastor, whose name I forget even though I went to school with his daughter, was that in order to experience a life of gratitude, which actually sounds pleasant, we need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. I think he might have gotten the whole idea from twelve step groups, because there is a 12-step saying: an attitude of gratitude, it's not just a platitude. The 12-step people are right. We ought to count our blessings, and not just once a year at thanksgiving. As today's reading from the psalm makes clear, God is on the job 24/7, not just on Thanksgiving, and so if we want to be aware of our blessings, we need to be on the job of counting them all the time, not just on thanksgiving.

It's hard to develop an attitude of gratitude when we live in a culture of marketing and advertising, because marketing and advertising work by instilling dissatisfaction. Even those TV shows about doing nice things for people are marketing ploys to make us feel dissatisfied. When Oprah or the Today show gives some lucky couple a dream wedding, they do that because marketing reps from wedding-related businesses want people to feel dissatisfied about having a less-lavish wedding, so they will spend more money and energy on their weddings even though they will never manage to get Tony Bennett as the soloist at their wedding. Shows in which a crew tears a house down and makes it over in a week are a ploy by construction-related industries to make us feel dissatisfied with our homes, so we will remodel them and spend money on paint, drywall, and new appliances. The fact is, you don't need a new kitchen with top-of-the-line appliances to make good food. One of the best meals I ever ate was cooked over an open hearth in Mexico. I ate it at a table with a plastic tablecloth, melmac plates and mismatched silverware. Good meals are a product of love and skill, not a \$3000 oven and fine china and silver. Asked the same question, the head chef at CCSU said the best meal he ate wasn't about fine food, it was about the company. His best meal was a hamburger he shared with a pro ball player. If we want to cultivate an attitude of gratitude, we will need to ignore a lot of messages in our world about what really matters. Designer clothes, an expensive car and perfect teeth don't make us happy. We are responsible for our own happiness, not cosmetic dentists.

Deep down we all know what really matters. And when we think about what really matters, we can all come up with a list of things for which we are grateful. I know I can. There is so much good in our lives, but most of our eyes go straight for the flaws. There is a truism that when churches look for pastors, they write job descriptions that will help them avoid finding a pastor with the same flaws as the departing pastor. They take it for granted that the pastor will have the same strengths as the departing pastor, which is certainly not something that can realistically be taken for granted. By focusing on the flaws they may do a poor job of finding a new leader. The same is true of our lives. If we focus on the flaws in our lives, we will probably fail to adequately appreciate what is good about life.

The message of the gospel is the opposite of the message of most advertising, so it might sound surprising that our denomination has developed a marketing plan that includes a national advertising campaign with TV and print ads. Carol and I attended a training yesterday, where we learned the importance of creating a brand and maintaining a connection with that brand in order to make the most of the advertising. It was very new, to think about being part of an industry that has been so destructive. It turns out that it's not the medium that is the problem with most advertising, it is the message. When a product genuinely fills a real need, then the advertising is not playing on our fears or insecurities. In this case, the product is church, a church that is as radically welcoming of people as Jesus himself was. It is a daunting thought--that we are proclaiming ourselves as welcoming to strangers, as accepting as Jesus, who ate with sinners, people even we might consider the dregs of society. Can we do it? Of course we can. But we need to bear in mind that the church is not a museum for saints. It is a hospital for sinners. It might make us feel good to think we are superior to prostitutes or drug addicts, but that isn't how God feels. And it's not how we feel, when we cultivate an attitude of gratitude. When we are grateful, we feel good about what we have, and not about our status with others. I doubt that this ad campaign will bring in prostitutes and drug addicts, but there is a chance we could see people different from us.

Earlier this year the Dr. Phil show featured people facing their fears. One woman, a pastor's wife, feared people with tattoos who wore leather and rode motorcycles. Dr. Phil paired her up with a man in his seventies with long hair, a beard, lots of tattoos and a Harley. They took a ride together on his motorcycle and then shared a picnic. She discovered that this man was from her father's hometown and knew her father. His interest in tattoos started when he served in the Navy. He turned out to be a gentle, kind person. She learned that deep down, they were very much alike and enjoyed each other's company. I bet that we would discover the same of anyone showing up at our doorstep--underneath it all they are the same as you and me, sinners needing love and guidance. We don't have to marry strangers who are different in order to be as welcoming as Jesus. We don't need to share their opinions, or vote as they vote, or live where they live. We need only smile, say hello, and ask them to tell us about themselves.