

Mr. Gratitude

A sermon posted by Bob Young

Interesting experience today: use two of our favorite passages with a focus we do not usually see. I want to focus on Eph. 5:18-20 and Col. 3:16-17.

I come across a great many resources to help in the preparation of sermons. Many are not worth the paper they are written on, but occasionally one finds something of value. The idea behind this morning's sermon comes from two sources--a sermon entitled "Doxology" by Fred Craddock and the July-September 2003 issue of *Pulpit Digest*, edited by William Willimon.

Gratitude

Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting and powerful prayers in the pulpit. Whyte always found something for which to be grateful. But one Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to herself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." To her surprise, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God that it is not always like this."

Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. They ran toward the nearest fence, but the storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it. Terrified, one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never prayed in public in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us." "All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat: 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'"

I tell these two stories because it seems to me that they have a little in common with Ephesians 5:18c-20, where Paul says "be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." I'll repeat that last phrase: "giving thanks to God the Father ***at all times and for everything*** in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Mr. Gratitude

Frankly, I didn't care for him when we first met. He's not the sort of person you warm up to at first. It takes time. I don't think that his friendship comes naturally. You have to work at getting used to him. When we first met, I was young, very young, maybe three or four. My mother never tired during those early years of getting the family together. Say, "thank you" to Uncle Graham for giving you the silver dollar, she said, or "What do you say to Grandma for the new watch?"

And from then on, he was always there, pushing into my life, particularly at dinner time. No one was allowed to pick up a fork and dig in to the food before him. "God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food." Then, after the meal, mom would say, I don't think I heard anyone say they enjoyed supper tonight. And before bedtime, after things were put away and the blanket was pulled up around me snugly, when the light was turned out, there he was; "Thank you God for Mom, for my sister Martha, for the nice day, and for everyone. Amen."

You couldn't have a party without him barging in, pushing forward, after the cake and ice cream, after the packages had been opened and the gifts received. Thank you (even though I already have two of these); thank

you all very much. It's just what I wanted. You learned, at an early age, you weren't permitted to qualify your opinion of him. You couldn't say, Thank you, but . . .

Just once, I thought, I'd love to go through a birthday party or a Christmas morning without him. "But he's part of the family," my mom would say. "But Mother, sometimes I just forget," I said. "Yes, I know," she said. "That's why I'm here to make sure that you don't. One day you won't forget; having him with you will be second nature. He'll be a part of you."

"And because he was part of my home growing up, when Jan and I married and began a home of our own, Mr. Gratitude came along to help us get started right. Why, I wouldn't think of a meal, or a party, or a family reunion, or bringing in the vegetables from the garden, or sitting together in the evenings without Mr. Gratitude."

So, this good friend of the family, the constant, if sometimes awkward, companion of my earliest years, skipped along beside me when I started school in the sixth year of my life. "You'll be glad I'm with you," he said. "I will?" I said incredulously. "Your teachers will be impressed that you know me. I've always gotten along well with teachers; they keep at it, year after year, one class after another, wondering whatever became of the ones they nurtured and to whom they tried to give their wisdom."

Well, I didn't understand all that, but I was happy to have whatever help he might give me with my elders. And, looking back, that was how I thought of him most of the time: Mr. Gratitude was just someone to help me get more of what I wanted. There was even a nursery song that told me there were "Two little magic words that can open any door." You bring in Mr. Gratitude because he helps you get what you want. Say thank you to the nice lady for the candy, and the next time she'll want to give you more. Say thank you to the nice God, and God will do the same.

"Isn't that how the game is played, Mr. Gratitude?" And he would just smile, pat me on the head and say, "Someday, you'll know better. Someday you'll understand."

During my teenage years, I didn't see much of him, which is probably true of most teenagers. Mr. Gratitude made himself scarce during these years when I was concerned with my rights, being treated like an adult (even when I didn't act like one), and the desire to stand on my own two feet.

Evidently, Mr. Gratitude is more comfortable during other periods of life. Oh, he did drop by occasionally at a few unexpected times. Mr. Gratitude helped me pack for college when the time came for that big step. "You know, many people have brought you to this place in life," he told me. "Yes, I know, but I don't have the words to tell them. I don't know what to say." "That's alright," he said. "You don't have to say anything to them. They have taught you and coached you; your mother has sacrificed and saved for you, not expecting anything in return. The best way to tell them is just to do the best you can." "And if I fail?" I asked. "What then?" "Then you give thanks for the experience and grow from it and try something else," he said. "That's just what I would have expected you to say." I said.

Four years in college, Mr. Gratitude loved it all. When I look back on those years, I can't do so without Mr. Gratitude. The generosity of parents, the good influence of Christians, the example of a minister who loved what he was doing, the job I got between my junior and senior year which enabled me to save up enough to get married.

There he was, popping in and out of my life at odd times. I didn't invite him or cultivate his friendship, because he doesn't come naturally. You must be taught to live with Mr. Gratitude. "Say 'thank you' to the nice lady," they tell you when you're young. Say 'thank you' to the nice God, they teach you in church.

Then comes that day when nobody has to tell you to be grateful. You just are. Gratitude has gotten inside you — it has become you.

And all this brings me to the strangest side of Mr. Gratitude. I came to expect him to pop up at my college graduation, the day I got married, the day our first son was born. If you were to go through my memories at our house, you'll see his smiling face, standing there, in the background--never one to miss a Christmas morning, or a family reunion, or a vacation. He was, is always there.

But what do you make of Paul's words when he says, 'always and for everything give thanks.' Isn't this a bit much to ask? I mean, I don't mind having Mr. Gratitude there for Thanksgiving dinner, or the day we leave for vacation, that is, when it's the time and the place. But always? Everywhere? In every situation? Joseph in prison? Israel in Egypt?

Every life knows dark days when Mr. Gratitude is the last person you want to drop by. It has nothing to do with not liking him. It's just that there is a time and place for everything. As good hearted and congenial as Mr. Gratitude is, there are times when his presence is as out of place as a clown at a formal state dinner. Isn't Paul going a little too far in saying we are to invite Mr. Gratitude 'always and everywhere.' There are times when he just doesn't fit. There are places he just doesn't belong. Surely there are times and places when the last word that ought to be said is, "Thanks."

Take Death, for instance. Grief? Yes. Anger? Hurt? Doubt? Sadness? Yes, all appropriate guests at a funeral, but not Mr. Gratitude. Let him come by later, when the crying is done, and the wound has begun to heal. But not when Death is sitting on his throne holding court.

When the call came, we were waiting Thanksgiving dinner. The phone rang about 2:00 p.m. "Let me get it," said Mr. Gratitude. "No, it may be for me," I said. Come to the hospital—the auto accident had taken the life of my mother and step-dad. Anger, Hurt, Grief, Guilt — they wanted to be my companions. But her suitcase had a birthday card she was bringing to me, and Mr. Gratitude was the one who brought comfort and healing, and help and hope. Mr. Gratitude is the one who enabled me to understand, "Say thank you to the nice God." Whatever you do, don't let Mr. Gratitude go. Make him stay. "Sitting around talking and putting up the memories..."

Take problems as an example. Anger, hurt, sadness, separation, misunderstanding. Thank you, God.

Paul was right. It is not only possible, but even necessary, that we should "always and for everything" give thanks. For a Christian there is nowhere we go that Mr. Gratitude doesn't belong.

It reminds me of a quote from old mystic from the middle ages, Meister Eckhart. It was he who once said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

"If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." Thank you for salvation in Christ. Thank you for forgiveness. Thank you for the church, for friends, for help, for healing.