

**Sermon Notes**  
**Thanksgiving Sunday -October 7, 2018**  
**Keith Hall**  
**“Gratitude”**

**Scripture: Psalm 100**

*Will you pray with me?*

*Loving Creator...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you this day. Amen*

There was a time in my life prior to joining the ministry team at St. Martin's when I considered myself to be a bit of an ingrate. I had trouble recognizing my blessings and expressing gratitude. Despite growing up in a home environment that modelled gratitude as part of daily living and despite the lessons heard in Sunday School in this very church, taught by good and faithful people, some of whom are in this room today, I just found it hard to express gratitude.

As a young adult I remember watching an episode of the Oprah Winfrey show where the guest expounded the virtues of making gratitude an intentional part of everyday living.

Seemed reasonable...so I tried to keep a gratitude journal. That lasted a couple of weeks.

I'm a nervous flier and every time a successful takeoff and landing occurred, I could be heard to say rather loudly, "Thank God". I determined however that was less about gratitude and more about an explosive release of stress and anxiety.

In her book *Grounded*, Diana Butler Bass describes an experience that almost identically mirrored my own...she recounts "I can vividly remember the painful Thanksgiving ritual where no one eats until everyone at the table said something they were thankful for. It was supposed to remind us about the real meaning of Thanksgiving, but it

felt more like a turkey hostage situation than a spiritual exercise in grace. I felt thankful when it ended.”<sup>1</sup>

Yes, it seemed clear that I had missed the memo on gratitude.

My life circumstances lead me away from the church for a while and yearned to return. When I did the “lack of the gratitude gene” troubled me even more, particularly as I was enveloped in a sea of welcome, compassion and concern from others in this place, all of whom seemed grateful I was back. My friend Brian was in ministry here and in our conversations about this he suggested that I try and familiarize myself with some of what was found in scripture about thanks. I wasn’t particularly successful... even at that..and I must admit I harbored a fair bit of skepticism when other Christians spoke of personal relationships they had with certain pieces of scripture ...that is ...until I read our scripture reading for this morning. Psalm 100 was my aha moment...Oprah would have been proud.

Psalm 100 illuminated gratitude for me.

Reportedly, Psalm 100 is the second favorite Psalm in the Old Testament running just slightly behind Psalm 23. I am not adept at reciting scripture from memory but, when (Lin e ah) Good put it to the piece of music we sang this morning it became solidly engrained and remains an important frame of gratitude reference that I have brooded over in the years since. The opening words to this Psalm have tripped off my tongue more than once. “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord” .... “Worship the Lord with gladness”

Psalm 100 is the unknown psalmist’s effort to capture the joy in his heart. It is an expression of gratitude to his maker... a simple gift of worship. The Psalm was written for the Jewish pilgrims who came into Jerusalem to worship. The writer didn’t offer a list to be thankful for but instead encouraged believers to “Give thanks to God and praise God’s name.”

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<sup>1</sup> Grounded, *Diana Butler Bass*, (Harper Collins 2018)

Gratefully, I could borrow the words and make them my own. In a world where pain and joy, hunger and plenty, fear and peace mingle incomprehensibly, there was a place I could go and see myself as a beloved child of a healing divine parent. The Psalm provided a conduit to the Holy for me that allowed meaningful expression of gratitude and ..boy did it appeal to my introverted nature...

I could do it on my own or I could do it communally...right here in this church. It made sense to me..it was a song I could sing.

There are those who would argue, rightly, I think, human beings must worship something. Even if we deny there is a God or gods, we need to express our gratitude for life in some way.

John Knox in his book *"Feasting on the Word"* puts it this way.

"We all have objects that we consider worthy of praise: a finely crafted musical instrument, ... a particular actor, or a beautiful panorama that appears after a bend in the road. 'Magnificent!' we say, making it clear that we have encountered something genuinely praise worthy."<sup>2</sup>

Despite my best efforts, I discovered that I could not escape from my desire to express my gratitude for the beauty around us and nor did I want to any longer. I learned that I likely wouldn't be grateful for every moment, but I could be grateful in every moment. I came to believe that the need to see joy in our world is always there; our human nature seems to call us to find a way to voice what our eyes see, our ears hear, our tongues taste, and our noses breath in when what has been revealed to us creates within us a deep, abiding joy. There are more sung expressions of this quality we call "Joy" than any other attribute in life with the possible exception of the one we call love, which gives us yet another reason to sing joyfully. The two expressions seem to go hand in hand: can we have joy without a love of something or love without a sense of joy?

And, in the midst of all this reflection, the thought that catches me is this

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, David S. Cunningham, selected sentences from his commentary, 130

– both joy and love give us reason to be grateful. It is gratitude – a sense of thanksgiving, which lifts us above a simple expression of joy in the more mundane aspects of our life. I may believe that an actor has done a magnificent job in performing a part and it may bring me momentary happiness because I had the chance to witness the scene resulting from that acting expertise, but it isn't likely that I would feel an abiding joy or feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Something more substantive gives me that pleasure and calls out of me a greater expression of appreciation defined solely by my sense of gratitude, my desire and my need to say, "thank you."

So, ...where do we get that joy...that desire to express a "thank you" in our day? Where do you find such joy? When do you express your gratitude?

Moments of pure thanksgiving may come about through familiar personal experiences like the sight of a baby, a whale breaching near a Mexican beach, a stunning Saskatchewan sunrise, snuggling with a grandchild or in the sounds of a favourite hymn.

We can also experience moments of pure thanksgiving communally...in the delight of participating in a team sport, in the breathless moments of a favourite piece of a dance or concert performance, in the celebrations of a wedding or a family reunion. These gratitude moments may be planned or unexpected, and we welcome them.

For those of us who identify as Christian, both in this church and around the world, an important communal place where we express praise and gratitude is in the worship ritual called the Eucharist or more familiar to us in the United Church, the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The word Eucharist is from the Greek, *euk-har-ist-ia*, meaning Thanksgiving or gratitude. It is a compound term derived from the Greek words *eu* for "well" and *kharis* for "favor" or "grace." Thus, Eucharist, that is, gratitude, means well favored or good grace. The Latin root of the word communion is "*communio-em*", meaning "fellowship, mutual participation, or sharing. Both words imply deep spiritual connection. As you know during the Communion ritual, "bread

is blessed and shared, a reminder that food is a gift from God..a gift that gives life to our bodies...juice is blessed and shared, a reminder that drink is a gift from God..a gift that gives joy to our souls. No one has to repay these gifts and God never withholds. All we can do is receive -in awe of such favor and grace-say thank you to the Giver- and pay it forward with service to others”<sup>3</sup> in need, the sick, those living in poverty, those who are racialized or oppressed or marginalized.

The expression of gratitude through a simple act of worship in Psalm 100 and then expressed in my own life brought into sharp focus for me how sacred and awe-filled this Sacrament is...a connection with God that is truly a visible reminder of an invisible reality.

We are a people who have much to be grateful for. As we experience the Sacrament of Communion in a few minutes let us receive the gifts of God for all who are present today with humility and respond with gratitude, thanksgiving and Christian action. May it be so.

Thanks be to God

Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Grounded, *Diana Butler Bass*, (Harper Collins 2018)