

Grace, Gratitude, and Gift: Thanksgiving Sunday
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – October 8, 2023

Hymns: VT 113, 117, 118

Psalm 136 (Inclusive Bible)

Thank you YHWH, for you are good!

Your love is everlasting!

Thank you, God of gods!

Your love is everlasting!

Thank you, Sovereign of sovereigns,

Your love is everlasting!

You alone perform such great marvels.

Your love is everlasting!

Your wisdom made the heavens.

Your love is everlasting!

You spread the lands out over the waters.

Your love is everlasting!

You made the great lights:

Your love is everlasting!

The sun to govern the day,

Your love is everlasting!

Moon and stars to govern the night.

Your love is everlasting!

You struck down the firstborn of Egypt,

Your love is everlasting!

And brought Israel out.

Your love is everlasting!

With mighty hand and outstretched arm,

Your love is everlasting!

You split the Sea of Reeds,

Your love is everlasting!

And led Israel through the middle,

Your love is everlasting!

And drowned Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt.

Your love is everlasting!

You led your people through the wilderness,

Your love is everlasting!

And struck down mighty rulers.

Your love is everlasting!

You cut down famous leaders,

Your love is everlasting!

Like Sihon, ruler of the Amorites,

Your love is everlasting!

And Og, ruler of Bashan.

Your love is everlasting!

You gave their land as an inheritance,

Your love is everlasting!

An inheritance to Israel, your faithful one.

Your love is everlasting!

You remembered us when we were under the yoke,

Your love is everlasting!

And snatched us from our oppressors,

Your love is everlasting!

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (adapted from the NRSV)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“God scatters abroad; and gives to the poor;

God’s righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ The One who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your partnership with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

I had an interesting conversation recently about gratitude. I was visiting with someone who has been dealing with some health challenges and found themselves thinking about the limits of gratitude, or what gratitude is not. Someone had told them that they should be grateful their health concerns weren't worse, that they were better off than others who had no prospect of recovery at all! And this didn't sit right. The person wondered: Is this what gratitude means – being glad we're not someone else, glad we're not in as bad a situation as others?

There's been a lot of discussion lately about the benefits of gratitude and gratitude practices to mental and physical health. Apparently, a regular practice of gratitude over time has been shown to measurably lower blood pressure, boost our immune systems, help regulate our cholesterol and stress hormones, help us become more emotionally resilient, help us sleep better, improve our relationships and overall sense of joy. That's incredible!¹ But perhaps, as my conversation showed, the type of gratitude matters, too. Telling someone in a difficult situation that they should be grateful can actually be a way of dismissing them, of avoiding having to deal with challenging feelings. This can contribute to a kind of "toxic positivity" – a refusal to face grief or pain or lament, whether one's own or someone else's. Telling someone going through a difficult time that at least they don't have it as bad as someone else is also a twisting of gratitude that puts us above others. The attitude of, at least one is doing better than so-and-so, isn't gratitude, it's competition, or being grateful one is better off than others. At the end of the day, it reflects a lack of empathy for so-and-so, who also does not deserve to struggle.

¹ Alissa Ellett, "Shocking News about Gratitude and Raising Healthy Kids," *Illustrated Ministry Blog*, 2018, <https://www.illustratedministry.com/2018/gratitude-healthy-kids/>

It reminded me of the an ancient Greek saying at the time of Jesus that a sage (perhaps Socrates or Plato) “was allegedly in the habit of thanking God for three things: ‘that I was born a human and not a beast; a man and not a woman; a Greek and not a Barbarian.’”² This saying is likely what Jesus was speaking to when he told his parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18): ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’” This kind of “gratitude” which comes with shaming others or “regarding others with contempt” is not in fact gratitude at all, but a way of placing oneself above others. So what is true gratitude, then? Let’s look to our Scripture passages for some guidance.

Psalms 136 is a psalm of praise or thanksgiving that has this repeating refrain, translated as: “for [God’s] steadfast love endures forever” (NRSV) or “Your love is everlasting!” (Inclusive Bible). Robert Alter reminds us that this kind of repetition made it so this Psalm could be read or sung as a call-and-response between a worship leader and a congregation (and *Voices Together* #117 does precisely this with Psalm 136, with the repeating refrain, “For your love is never ending”). Now Alter interestingly translates this line as “for [God’s] kindness is forever.”³ Now the Hebrew word here is “*khesed*,” which has multiple layers of meaning that don’t directly translate into English. According to *The Bible Project*, this word “combines the ideas of love, generosity, and enduring commitment all into one. *Khesed* describes an act of promise-keeping loyalty that is

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-has-not-made-me-a-woman/>

³ See Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 469.

motivated by deep personal care.”⁴ It appears in various key stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, including as a description of Ruth’s keeping of her promise never to leave Naomi; God’s faithfulness to Jacob after he is sold into enslavement by his brothers but gradually regains his dignity and humanity; and, of course, God’s liberation of the Israelites from Egypt is called “an act of *kheshed* because it was about God keeping [God’s] word.” So this is what is celebrated in Psalm 136, where it is repeated 26 times that God’s “*kheshed* is forever.” This is even celebrated in the central description biblical description of God’s character, which appears many times: God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal love [*kheshed*] and faithfulness” (see Exodus 34:6 and elsewhere).⁵

So this Psalm starts out strong, and we find ourselves joining in with that refrain.

Let’s try it: Thank you YHWH, for you are good!
Your love is everlasting!
Thank you, God of gods!
Your love is everlasting!
Thank you, Sovereign of sovereigns,
Your love is everlasting!
You alone perform such great marvels.
Your love is everlasting!

It goes on to talk about God’s creation of the world (certainly to be universally celebrated) and there is the discussion of the liberation of the Israelites from enslavement in Egypt (also a worthy thing for which to be thankful) but then all of a sudden things become somewhat unsettling. Alongside celebrations of Israel’s freedom, we find: “You struck down the firstborn of Egypt,” “And drowned Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt.” It then goes on to celebrate the conquest of Canaan, even naming

⁴ See: “Word Study: Loyal Love,” *The Bible Project* video, posted Jan. 12, 2021, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/loyal-love/>

⁵ “Loyal Love,” *The Bible Project* video.

specific rulers whom God apparently “struck” or “cut down” so the Israelites could take their land. I think these kinds of statements have us squirming in our seats – and rightly so! This celebration of one people’s gains at the expense of another people, this ascribing of God’s blessing to violence and conquest – this is an extreme version of gratitude at the expense of others. This is thanking God that one was born an Israelite and not an Egyptian or Canaanite! This is thanking God for one’s privilege, that one is better off than others – which is not what the rest of the Bible means when it calls the Israelites to “remember that they were slaves in Egypt.” And in our time of trying to name and address the truths of colonialism, this lesson is close to home for us.

Our second Scripture passage from 2 Corinthians gives us a distinctly different vision of gratitude, specifically from the early church community in the city of Corinth, to whom Paul is writing this letter. On the one hand, this passage does echo the gratitude of Psalm 136, which praises God for God’s “abundant” provision of blessings. But it doesn’t stop there. This praise and thanks to God is paired with a response by the church community: to share that blessing with others. Verse 8-9 says, “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”⁹ As it is written,

God scatters abroad; and gives to the poor;
God’s righteousness endures forever.”

Now this final line is not a quote from our psalm, but rather from Psalm 112:9, and yet here is that refrain again – God’s *khesed* endures forever!

So this is a vision of gratitude that is not just: “thanks, God, for blessing us but not others” but rather, “thanks, God, for blessing us. Now how can we be generous to others with what has been given to us?” In other words, how can we pay it forward?

This is the response to God's gifts that we are being invited into here. As v. 11-12 states, "¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God." It reminds me of that children's song: "Love is something if you give it away... you end up having more."

It's this kind of gratitude that Christine Pohl argues shapes the entire life of the church. We are called to be a gratitude community, both in our gratitude to God in worship and prayer (including communion or the Eucharist, meaning "Great Thanksgiving"), but also in our generosity toward others – especially those in need in our community and beyond. Pohl speaks of this as "a cycle of grace, gratitude, and gift [which] strengthens community and brings glory and thanks to God."⁶ In a society built on dissatisfaction in ourselves and with what we have, Pohl concludes that it can actually be "countercultural" to practice this kind of gratitude and generosity.⁷ But, "When gratitude shapes our lives, fidelity is more likely to be joy-filled, truth is life-giving, and hospitality is offered with generosity and joy."⁸

So as we celebrate Thanksgiving this weekend, may it be a reminder of true gratitude: not that we have more than others, not that we alone are blessed, but that we have the privilege of having enough to share, and the joy of generosity with our time and resources. As Paul says, "Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!" AMEN

⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 24.

⁷ Pohl, 27.

⁸ Pohl, 57.