

“Looking with Gratitude”

October 25, 2020

A *Wonder-Full Life* series – Faith Commitment Sunday – Livestream

John Rutter is an English composer and conductor. Like many in the music industry, he knows the toll this year has taken on many in the arts community – no live performances, no audiences. But in a blog post a few weeks ago titled, “Reasons to be Cheerful,” Rutter looked on this year with a lens of gratitude. He celebrated what’s come out of this challenging time, including new ways for musicians to connect virtually. He said that many directors “have been much moved by the messages of appreciation they have received from members who are (for example) homebound, disabled, living in remote places, unable to join a ‘normal’ choir because of irregular work patterns – or simply too shy to have come forward before.”

Rutter highlighted the livestreaming of concerts, recitals, and church services. Some of that was already happening, but he wrote about the intimacy and authenticity that comes when a musician is sharing their gifts from their living room. I can relate!

Rutter also says that many groups and ensembles are sounding amazing, which he credits to the fact that they have to be more intentional about listening to each other because they’re not together in the same physical space. I thought about that for the church, too – being more intentional about connecting with calls and cards.

Rutter ended his post this way: “I hope the most lasting legacy of 2020 for musicians and music-lovers will be that often short-lived emotion: gratitude. You don’t always fully appreciate a gift until it is taken away. Music is a great gift to us all, and we should cherish it.”

Rutter is on target. Gratitude is often short-lived for us. It comes and goes. There are seasons when we do really well, and other times we don’t. And perhaps you’re like me – always having good intentions about starting and maintaining a gratitude journal, writing something every day, then staying strong for a week or maybe even more, until you miss a day and then another day, and you don’t get back to it. Good intentions at first...

We know that gratitude is important. It’s vital to living our faith in Jesus Christ. We hear the directive in First Thessalonians 5: *Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.* I don’t memorize well, but that verse is important to me because of a preposition. Give thanks *in* all circumstances – not *for* all circumstances. There’s a difference. Giving thanks *in* means that we’re practicing gratitude constantly. And if we’re honest, that’s a challenge in a normal time. Perhaps we’ve found it even more difficult this year.

Diana Butler Bass says that gratitude is “absolutely central to faith” and has transformative power. The root word is the same for gratitude, grace, and gifts. Gratitude is “an outflow of love expressed toward God and our neighbor.” She calls

gratitude “a disposition of our connection to one another, of our stewardship for the good gifts of the earth, of our ability to care and give away gifts of our own lives” and “the capacity to recognize the abundance of gifts that surrounds us.”

Gratitude is more than a feeling or emotion that’s fleeting. It’s a position we take. It’s an ethic - a way we live. And it’s not limited to health and wealth, though sometimes it seems like we limit gratitude to material blessings and well-being. We don’t claim a prosperity gospel - believe and receive - or just get enough and be thankful enough and all is well.

Scripture goes far beyond the limitations we make to include “all circumstances” - all areas of our lives and all times. And I was struck by something I read from Ann Voskamp: “God asks us to give thanks in everything — because this is the way you live through anything. Especially 2020.”

Sometimes we forget that much of what we read in our faith story happened in times of challenge, persecution, and difficulty. In the Book of Acts, early Christians were known as followers of The Way. It wasn’t a perfect picture of acceptance from others outside of the community, but we get a sense of the strong community among them. In chapter 4, we get another snapshot of their life together.

William Barclay says that the culmination of the prayers of early Christians was shown in their love of others. They were living in the power of resurrection - the promise of new life and hope. They were sharing the Good News of Jesus being raised from the dead. “They never forgot that someone had not enough and that all must help.”

In the verses we read, they have an intense sense of responsibility for each other, which motivates them to share all they had. It wasn’t that they were mandated to share by the structures around them; it was spontaneous. The connection of their hearts and souls in faith showed in how they shared their possessions. Faith is lived out; what we believe shows in what we do and how we live and give.

For them to live this way, there was trust among them. No one was fearful of not having enough; no one was boastful about how much they had. They had to trust that their shared resources were used wisely. To be able to share openly and generously cultivates gratitude.

Now it’s also true that early Christians anticipated Jesus’ return soon. Some might say it’s short-sighted, but even so, their attention to community is striking when we consider how we sometimes hold so tightly to what we have. Certainly, the health of that community is strong. Can you imagine no one fearing for their well-being and trusting that there was help if needed?

I celebrate that there are moments when that’s been the case here. Investing in community with each other is a blessing whether it’s offering our time, talents, or treasure. Because of your generosity, we can provide needs when someone is in that place.

As we offer faith commitments today, I pray that we have that same sense of trust as a community of faith. Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand. They are intimately connected in how we view what we have and what we give. Do we think more about what we don't have than what we do have? How does our perspective shape our giving?

I pray that we make faith commitments not out of guilt or pressure, but out of a sense of connection to one another as human beings and a deep sense of gratitude. Barclay says, "when the heart moves us to share, then faith is lived out." Faith can't be mandated or legislated, only lived out.

Looking at our faith ancestors, what will we do? This is about how we decide to live and decide to give - and how gratitude can shape our decisions. What we've focused on in this series is powerful stuff: looking back to consider what we learned about giving and how it affects us now, to realize that faith and finances - money and making meaning - are related, looking in to think about our real motivation in giving (do we find joy or expect something in return?), looking out to realize the impact we can make, to see God's abundance in our lives, and today, looking with gratitude that isn't dependent on everything being awesome all the time, but on the truth that we are beloved children of God who are called to give thanks in everything (not for everything) and share with thanksgiving. Maybe you've seen or heard it before: "Gratitude turns what we have into enough."

Some of us offer a table blessing before we eat - we say "grace," but what if we offered a word of thanks at the end of the meal, too? I wonder how our lives might be transformed if we started our day with "thank you, God" and ended our day with "thank you, God."

I read a BBC article about a man named Chuck Feeney, who gave away his fortune - \$9 billion - over the last 40 years of his life. He gave it away while he is still living - first anonymously, but then through a foundation he established, especially focusing on health, education, reconciliation, and human rights. While we may not have the same resources to give, the thought of giving while we can see the results is powerful. What if our lives were more focused on gratitude - from the beginning to the end?

The church of Acts challenges us to consider how we see ourselves in community - as a part of community. The image of the community coming around George and Mary Bailey and their family is now iconic. Sometimes the focus is on Clarence getting his wings, but it's really a powerful story of relationships and community - and what we do for others when they're in need because we're connected.

One more word Diana Butler Bass: "Gratitude is not a psychological or political panacea, like a secular prosperity gospel, one that denies pain or overlooks injustice, because being grateful does not "fix" anything. Pain, suffering, and injustice—these things are all real. They do not go away. Gratitude, however, invalidates the false

narrative that these things are the sum total of human existence, that despair is the last word. Gratitude gives us a new story. It opens our eyes to see that every life is, in unique and dignified ways, graced...”

I love that word – that gratitude gives us a new story. I hope we practice gratitude, but I also hope we tell people why we’re grateful. If someone has done something to illicit gratitude, then tell them! If something happens and you’re grateful, talk about it! Sharing gratitude only helps all of us to feel it more deeply, to look for it more closely, and to share it more openly. It also reminds us that we’re not alone – that we don’t go through this life alone – and that we truly depend on God and each other. Cultivating gratitude moves us to deeper faith and resilience, deeper compassion for others, deeper trust in God’s presence in all times, and a deeper commitment to justice and peace.

So, look around with gratitude. May we be bold in serving God, sharing Good News of God’s grace, and the resources we have to give.

Thanks be to God. Amen.