

[Deuteronomy 8:7-18](#)  
[Psalm 65](#)  
[2 Corinthians 9:6-15](#)  
[Luke 17:11-19](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE EVE OF THANKSGIVING,  
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DAVIDSONVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good evening. It is wonderful for us to gather together this evening ecumenically for the purpose of giving thanks to God. What an honor it is for me to be invited share with you the wisdom of God's Word as the new preacher on the block! When we gather as a thankful people of God, we ready ourselves for the expansion of our common ministry for the Kingdom of God.

Being a priest and biologist, I'm always emphatic about thanking God for giving us life, first and foremost. Life, as popular author Bill Bryson reminds us,

*"starts with a single cell. The first cell splits to become two and the two become four and so on. After just forty-seven doublings, you have ten thousand trillion cells in your body and are ready to spring forth as a human being. And every one of those cells knows exactly what to do to preserve and nurture you from the moment of conception to your last breath."*

*"There isn't a thing they won't do for you. They let you feel pleasure and form thoughts. They enable you to stand and stretch and caper... They keep your hair growing, your ears waxed, your brain quietly purring. .... And not once in your years have you thanked even one of them. "*

They deserve our appreciation and praise. In particular, we owe immeasurable gratitude to the source from whence they came into being.

And the ultimate source for this amazing, fascinating cacophony of cellular interactions we boldly define as "God." Even our ability to be thankful, in some ways, belongs ultimately to God. We need divine assistance in becoming truly thankful followers of Jesus Christ.

We have several well-appointed lessons for Thanksgiving this evening. We have an unique lesson from Luke tonight, one that you can only find in Luke, and not in the other two Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Mark: the Healing of the Ten Lepers. Jesus is traveling through some "mixed" area, as Luke tells us. He is heading toward Jerusalem in an area between Samaria and Galilee. The inhabitants of Samaria are the Samaritans, who are half Jewish and half Gentile, and therefore, considered impure by the observant Jews of Jesus' day. Of the ten lepers healed, nine are Jews and one Samaritan. The Jewish Law requires that a person healed of leprosy show himself to a priest. And that's why Jesus tells them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." The healing was a gradual process. The text tells us, "As they went, they were healed." Only one of them decides to turn back to Jesus and give thanks to God for this miraculous healing. The grateful Samaritan man turns back and praises God with a loud voice, much like the joy and exuberance we give to our Easter proclamation: Alleluia. Christ is risen! Then Jesus seems annoyed and disturbed by the nine other miraculously healed lepers for they are nowhere to be found after this amazing gift of healing has been granted to them. He then sends the grateful Samaritan on his way and tells him, "Your faith has made you well." The faith of the Samaritan is the solid trust he has in God. And this trust leads to his hope--his hope in the Divine Mercy of God that has made him well.

The Samaritan's gratefulness is demonstrated by his extreme humility. "He prostrated at Jesus' feet and thanked him." There is yet another aspect to the Samaritan's gratefulness, even though it's not explicitly mentioned by Luke. And that is the level of his forgiveness, his forgiving heart. Thankfulness and forgiveness are interrelated. A person who holds grudges, who gossips a lot, who broods constantly over past injuries does not have enough room in his heart to be truly thankful. He is too busy counting his losses, finding faults in others, and having self-pity over his perceived plight. He needs to seek counseling, seriously. On the other hand, an authentically thankful person is one who forgives. An authentically thankful person is one who embodies the Lord's Prayer, when we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

To be thankful spiritually, we need to forgive. On top of that, we also need to learn to accept forgiveness.

Too often our urge and readiness to forgive is a way of exerting control over another. We fear accepting forgiveness from another person because such a gift makes us powerless--we fear the loss of control involved.

Yet we continue to pray "Forgive us our trespasses." Beloved, if we want to be truly thankful, we need to learn to accept God's forgiveness and unconditional love in Jesus Christ whose life, death, and resurrection has made us a new people---forgiven, healed and renewed.

Apart from forgiveness, another hallmark of authentic thankfulness is remembrance---holy remembrance. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses issues a strong admonition to the Israelites not to forget the great things that the LORD God has done for them. In fact, verses 11 to 17 form one extraordinarily long sentence. Moses is not verbose here. But he is trying very hard to convey the weight of the situation against which he is warning. He predicts that the future prosperity for Israel could lead to complacency and a sense of entitlement to their achievement. They may forget that all their abundance, prosperity and wealth comes from God alone. Moses then highlights the importance of remembrance---the holy remembrance of the goodness and mercy LORD God---as a summons for Israel to remain thankful and faithful.

*"But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today."  
(Deuteronomy 8:18)*

What Moses warns against Israel some 3200 years ago can be applied to us, and to every age in the history of humankind. When times are good and prosperous, people have a tendency to become forgetful about the blessings they have, and the source from whence they came---God. When times are bad, more people cry for help and start asking, "Where is God in all of this suffering, poverty, and scarcity?"

Poet Laureate, Maya Angelou, eloquently puts it:

*"I find it interesting that the meanest of life, the poorest existence, is attributed to God's will, but as human beings become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed."*

Sisters and brothers, I know we are facing some hard economic times at the moment. When it's becoming harder and harder to make ends meet, it may become even harder to remain thankful. But now is an important time to remember the goodness and mercy of God. Now is the important time to remember that all our blessings, abundance, honor, and prosperity comes from God alone. An attitude of gratitude, an attitude of thankfulness to God, is ever more important now than ever if we want to experience true blessedness and prosperity again. With God's help, we can strive to become a non-anxious presence in a very stressed out world. Do you want to see what fear and anxiety can do? Just look at the erratic fluctuations of the stock market. How much of that is caused by fear? And fear is a reflection of lack of gratitude, forgiveness and thankfulness.

With God's help, may we free ourselves from a culture of uncertainty, fear and anxiety, starting in our hearts. Remember these comforting words of Jesus recorded by Matthew,

*"Do not be anxious about life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which one of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" (Matthew 6:25-27)*

Friends, being thankful can dispel our anxiety and fear, regardless of the circumstances we are in. It is really a counter-intuitive concept. When the whole world starts to tighten up their giving, it is the time for the Church to expand her ministry--indeed, her ministry of God's boundless love and oceans of mercy for all who come to Christ in faith, with thanksgiving.

As Paul instructs the Church in Corinth,

*"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."*

Now is the time for us to make a difference. And we are doing that. At All Hallows' and most other area churches, we have seen a higher number of families needing help this Thanksgiving. Our small Foodbank served 44 families this past Monday. By God's grace, the generosity of our parishioners has enabled these families to share in the abundance that the more fortunate ones among have. Our Youth Group also helped serve Thanksgiving dinner to the hungry in Annapolis. And I know, we all are doing what we can, extending our helping hands to those in need.

Beloved, the challenge we have ahead of us, as faithful Christians in a rapidly changing and uncertain world is this: Are we going to lead by example as a people informed by thankfulness and hope in God? Or are we going to succumb to the worries and smallness of an anxious world?

As a sign of my demonstrable ecumenical sensitivity tonight, I am going to quote Dr. Stanley Hauerwas, a renowned Methodist theologian, who says,

*"No one can become virtuous merely by doing what virtuous people do. We can only become virtuous by doing what virtuous people do in the manner that they do it. Therefore one can only learn how to be virtuous, to be like Jesus, by learning from others how that is done. To be like Jesus requires that I become part of a community that practices virtues, not that I copy his life point by point." (Hauerwas, 121)*

Friends, that's why the church can help us to become more thankful, more faithful stewards of God's bounty.

Beloved, to be thankful requires that we be humble, forgiving, willing to be forgiven, always remembering the goodness and mercy of God. Above all, our authentic thankfulness will enable us to expand our thanksgiving through the Church to God Almighty, who so wonderfully created the world that he saved and restored through his Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Give thanks to God each and every day. Give thanks to God for every cell of our being. Give thanks to God for his indescribable gift!

Let us pray.

Almighty and gracious Father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great bounty, for the provision of our

necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

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