

A couple of years ago I participated in a very interesting challenge during Lent. It was called “The Complaint Free Life” modeled after a book by Will Bowen. The premise of the book was to take the challenge to not complain for 21 days so that we could focus on the blessings in our lives given by God, rather than dwelling on the negative things that happen, much of which is beyond our control.

Participating in this series made me much more aware of how much I complained! Even now when I catch myself complaining I think about that study. In her book: “Grateful” Diana Butler Bass reminds us that as people of faith, we are called to be people who are thankful. This statement is rooted in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 which tells us: “In everything give thanks.”

For the next seven-weeks we will be entering into a time of gratitude. A time to shift our perspective from a complaining life to a grateful one. We will be using stories from the Bible and Diana Butler Bass’ book “Grateful” to guide our time of study.

I think we can all relate to the way that Bass started her book. She shared this story:

I pulled the card from the envelope, appreciatively fingering its velvety thickness. It was formal and traditional, the sort one sees anymore, with a single word embossed on the front: “Grateful.” I opened it and read, ‘Thank you for the lovely thank-you note!’ I read it again, just to make sure. It was a thank-you note for a thank-you note. Now what? Do you send a thank-you note for the thank-you note received for sending a thank-you note? Saying thank you can be so complicated.¹

Many times, I believe that we are grateful, but sometimes life can get so busy this feeling may be fleeting. I don’t know about you but in my mind, I have written a million thank you cards, but in actuality it is much less.

In fact, it can be a lot easier to complain than to think about all the things we are grateful for. As we take the next seven weeks to focus on gratitude, I hope this time will remind us of all the beautiful gifts that God gives to us each day. So today, may we be grateful together as the body of Christ.

The first step to being grateful is to set aside time to acknowledge what God is doing in our lives. We see this attitude of gratefulness modeled in the Old Testament.

In our Scripture from Ezra we find the people expressing their gratitude to God. They are taking part in an important ritual: the laying of the foundation for the temple. Commentary tells us that the temple had been burned 49 years before, so on this important day the people of God were moving forward in reconstruction.²

Following the ritual of the time, they took a stone from the foundation of the old temple and laid it in the location of the foundation for the new temple. Just like we do in worship each Sunday, they used the words from the psalter to give thanks to God.

In laying a strong foundation for their faith their first act was to worship God. Our God is always worthy to be praised, but sometimes we may not feel like praising God. Although many of the Israelites were happy on this day, there were those who were sad. Although having this ceremony was a moment of joy, there were many who were still lamenting the burning of the other temple.

We too find that we experience times in which we are grateful and sad at the same time. This may happen for us over Thanksgiving when we are happy to be with our family but missing loved ones that have passed on. This happens to us in worship on All Saints Day, when we give thanks to God for the saints in our lives, but also name the saints that have gone onto glory.

Commentary reminds us that this passage of Scripture is about the importance of worship and shares that: “Worship is the center of any thriving community of believers.”³ This means that no matter if we are happy or sad we are called to give God thanks and praise.

Every Sunday in worship we have the opportunity to thank God. This is why we come to worship to say thank you God for sustaining us another week. We have many reasons to give God thanks: for the beauty of creation, for our very lives, for the body of Christ, and for answered prayers.

I am excited to see what you are grateful for today and each upcoming week during prayer time. As we focus on what we are grateful for I think we may be surprised to realize that there is something we can be grateful for every day.

Every day we are called to thank God. No matter our circumstance in life God never changes. When we give thanks to God, we recognize who God is and who God is calling us to be. God is our Creator, the one who gives us life. God is our Savior, the one who saves us from sin and death. God is the Holy Spirit who sustains us each day. Our response to this gift from God is being grateful.

We see this modeled for us in the Gospel of Luke by the leper who returned to tell Jesus Christ thank you.

If anyone had a reason to complain during biblical time it was those with leprosy. Leprosy was a terrible disease that caused pain and that came with a stigma. People who had leprosy had to leave their friends and family so that they would not contract this terrible disease. They lived on the outskirts of town and if anyone came close to them, they had to shout: “Unclean. Unclean!”⁴ They were ostracized, and many were never able to rejoin their families.

These ten lepers we hear about in our Scripture today probably asked God: “Why did this have to happen to me?” I think we all ask God that question at some point in our lives when we don’t understand why we are in the situation we are in. Usually questions like this are the source of our complaining and ingratitude.

Ingratitude is the inability to be thankful for or see what you have. Have you ever met anyone who seemed to have it all, yet were still very unhappy? This is because we live in a culture that worships “cheap gratitude.”

Diana Butler Bass describes cheap gratitude as “our understanding of thanks [that] is polluted by our toxic dissatisfactions as we praise God for material possessions instead of the good gifts of nature and neighbor.”⁵ In this way God is treated like a genie instead of our Creator. When we are ungrateful, we become very self-centered and are unable to see all the gifts that God has given to us. When we think like this when are unable to see that the community of God is available to support us and that God is right there with us.

There was something about Jesus that day that made the 10 lepers reach out to him. What is interesting is that they ask him for mercy and not for healing. Maybe they had given up on ever being healed. Perhaps they just longed for acceptance.

Unlike the many other people who looked down upon them, Jesus saw them. Jesus acknowledged them and responded to their needs. Jesus was not afraid of them and did not treat them as less than.

Jesus knew that he could heal them immediately, but he knew that they would not be allowed back into their communities until they were cleared by a priest. Upon being healed the men must have been so excited. They could now go back and be with their families. Like these nine lepers, sometimes we are so thankful that something wonderful happens that we don’t have time to thank God and yet that is what Scripture calls us to do.

We see that one of the men does come back to thank Jesus for being healed. In a moment of extreme gratitude, he kneels at the feet of Jesus. What is interesting is that the man is not only a leper, but a Samaritan. This man would have experienced an even deeper level of ostracism and may have been even more thankful to return to his home.

Commentary tells us that “this story challenges us to regard gratitude as an expression of faith...For those who have become aware of God’s grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.”⁶

These passages of Scripture from both the Old and New Testaments call us to embody gratitude as an expression of our faith. Something amazing happens when we do this. It shapes the way we experience God and our lives.

It is amazing what can happen when gratitude is a part of our every day lives. In fact, our whole outlook can change.

This next week I want you to pay special attention to the times that you complain. What is it about? What are the things that really get to you? Ask yourself is there anything you can do to change these things? Then I want you to think about one thing you are grateful for so that you can share it in worship during the prayer time each week.

Today we are all called to feel grateful because of the God that we serve. The God that we serve can take the rubble of a burned down temple to create a new one. The God that we serve cares about the lonely, the sick, and the oppressed. The God that we serve will make a way for us when we feel like there is no way.

Our response to God’s gifts in our lives is worship. When we worship God with our entire lives, we humble ourselves before God. Just like the leper who threw himself at the feet of Jesus, we also are called to bow down to the one who is worthy of our praise.

So how can we practice gratitude each day?

- 1) Start your day by reading a psalm. The psalms are a beautiful place to find the words to express our gratitude to God.
- 2) Start keeping a gratitude journal. Write one or more things down a day that you are grateful for.

- 3) Write a thank you card to someone you are grateful for this week. You have no idea how this will brighten someone’s day.
- 4) Start your prayer time each week by saying thank you to God. You may be amazed at all the things that you are grateful for that you didn’t even realize.

There are so many ways to express our gratitude to God. Try some of these ways and see how they bring you closer to God and the body of Christ.

The good news for our lives today is that we always have something to be grateful for. God is always bestowing gifts upon us. Whether the gift is a new day, a new temple, or a new life after experiencing healing, may we continue to give God all the praise. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Diana Butler Bass. “Gratitude: The Transforming Power of Giving Thanks.” Harper One. San Francisco. 2018. P. XI, XII.

² The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IV. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 270.

⁵ Diana Butler Bass. “Gratitude: The Transforming Power of Giving Thanks.” Harper One. San Francisco. 2018. P. XX.

⁶ Ibid.