

In 2014 there was an 11-year-old American boy named Richie who wanted to thank all those who had given their lives on D-Day who died for our country. On the 70th year remembrance he went to Normandy, France with his parents. During the official D-Day celebration, local police didn't allow the boy to enter the cemetery in his WWII-style uniform.

So, the boy took his American flag down to Omaha Beach. He looked across the ocean and imagined all the troops coming in that day to fight for freedom. Then he stood in a posture of salute to thank the soldiers for an hour and a half.

His hour and a half salute got him a lot of attention. Tourists walked by, and veterans stopped to salute him and thank him for caring enough to thank all those who had served through his tribute. This little boy made a huge statement all from standing still and saluting.

Compared to many of our soldiers in the U.S. armed forces this little boy's 1 ½ hours was but a tiny fraction of what is done by our military every day. The reason it had such a big impact on people is because they realized it was difficult for an 11-year-old boy to stand completely still with a flag in the wind for that long of a time.

When the boy finished, he collapsed in exhaustion, but he was able to withstand this tribute because his goal of thanking others was more important to him than how he was feeling in the moment. On this day, he gave all of himself for this one purpose to thank those who had given their lives to protect others.

Today we are thankful for all the veterans who have served our country so faithfully. They gave all of themselves for the task of protecting our country and our freedom. These are men and women who take the Scripture from John 15:15 seriously which reads: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” These veterans embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ and the true meaning of community.

These men and women can continue to protect and serve because they do not work as individuals, but as a unit, encouraging each other, supporting each other, and saving each other when necessary.

So, it is with the body of Christ. We are better together, and we are called to give thanks to God in community.

Throughout Scripture we see that God calls us together in community to offer our gratitude to God. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, we see that God called the Israelites to bring the first fruits of their land to offer to God. One person could not do this on behalf of all the people. Each family was required to offer something. Alongside these offerings was “a burnt offering of a year-old lamb.”<sup>1</sup>

What is interesting is that in the act of offering these gifts the people are blessed. The very food that they offer to God, once blessed by a priest, is then given back to the community for them to eat.<sup>2</sup> In this surprising turn of events, the people remember that every gift they have is a gift from God.

We continue this tradition of bringing our first fruits to God as we come to worship each Sunday. *The Wesley Study Bible* shares that in worship we offer “the first fruits of our harvest” the very best part of ourselves for God’s glory.<sup>3</sup> Whether we are offering our spiritual gifts or our financial gifts, our offering is made to God in community.

In her book, “Grateful,” Diana Butler Bass shares that “gratitude is social.”<sup>4</sup> She says, “...the deepest experiences of gratitude now move us beyond islands of isolation into connection and community.”<sup>5</sup> This quote rang true for me this week. In a season where so many people find themselves isolated and depressed the cure is connecting with one another and giving thanks to God.

Gratitude really is social. Just think about it, when something wonderful happens the first thing we want to do is share the news with the people we love. Other people remind us what we are grateful for when we sometimes forget by ourselves.

In community we are grateful because in community we can move beyond our own needs. In community we can see and respond to the needs of those in the body of Christ.

In the early church in Acts 6, the community recognized that the widows needed some additional support. The Hellenists widows were no longer being fed in the daily distribution of food. So, the disciples heard this and responded. They appointed not one but seven disciples to take care of this issue so that all the widows would be fed. I am sure the widows were thankful because without those who called for change on their behalf they may have perished.

There is a reason that God created us to live in community, so that no one would be left behind, and all would be taken care of. God’s people survived because they learned how to take care of each other and live in community.

God taught the Israelites that everything they had should be used for God’s glory. Something they thought was garbage, like the cast-off crops, could literally save the life of their neighbor. It was because of this community of God that people survived during these harsh times when famines came.

We, too, are called to share all that we have and all that we are with God and the people of God. We see this same point is reiterated through the work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Jesus came into the world and showed us how to continue to care for God’s people. Like the Old Testament, Jesus talked about social responsibility, of taking care of those who were poor, the outsiders, and widows. He broke down walls as he ministered to people that others thought were untouchable and unclean.

Jesus cared for all the people he met and those who sought him out. He showed us time and time again that we are better when we work together for God. It was Jesus who sent out the disciples two by two in Luke 10 when he said: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborer’s are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborer’s into his harvest.”

This time the disciples were called to offer themselves as the first fruits of the harvest, but they were not alone. They had one another. We see that all throughout the Bible God paired people together to do the work of the Lord. Abraham had Sarah. Moses had Aaron. Elijah had Elisha. James had his brother John.

We do God’s work together because although it is beautiful it can be hard. It is a life of sacrifice and we need one another so that we can stay on the right path. So that when one of us feels like giving up the other one is there cheering us on and vice versa.

We do God’s work together so that we can remind each other that God is with us and so that we can remind each other that it is a gift to be in ministry together. In fact, if it were not for another disciple of Christ, I would not be in ministry today.

Twenty years ago, I found God asking me to give of my first fruits and offer my life to Christ in ministry. It happened at an ordination service.

At the end of the service the Bishop issued a call for those who felt called to ministry to come forward. The Holy Spirit beckoned me forward, but my sixteen-year-old self could not move from the bleachers.

Then suddenly out of nowhere my friend Lynda pulled me out of my row and said: “Jessie it’s time to go.” I knew what she meant, so I followed her and hand in hand we walked toward the bishop. Linda and I were an unlikely pair as we walked up the aisle. I was sixteen-year-old Caucasian teenager, and she was a middle-aged African American woman who was an ordained minister in the Baptist Church.

Linda saw something in me that I was not ready to see in myself. I knew I was called, but I didn’t know what to do next. Linda provided this opportunity for me as she listened to the Holy Spirit in her life. I often wonder where I would be now if Linda had not invited me to take that important walk that day.

We are better when we serve God together. In a season where we have found ourselves more isolated, we have to be even more intentional about being grateful together.

We are grateful together when we give thanks to God that we can still gather in this place. We are grateful together when we give thanks to God for each person on this charge and their life. We are grateful together when we offer ourselves as a first fruit offering to God.

This week I want you to think about one way that you can offer yourself to God. Maybe it will be through prayer, or through calling another person on the charge, maybe it will be by committing to take part in our upcoming Advent study. There are always more ways that we can serve God.

**The good news for our lives today is that we have been blessed by the gift of the body of Christ.** May we continue to be grateful together. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. P. 635.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley Study Bible Abingdon Press. Nashville, Tn. 2009. P. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass. “Grateful.” P. 97

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P. 100.