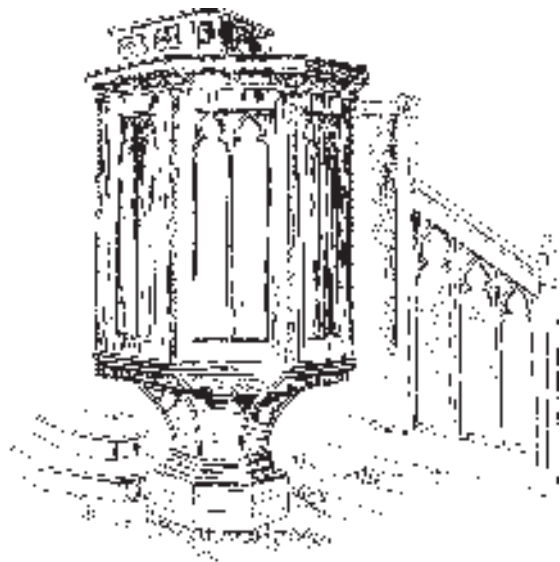


November 22, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Extreme Gratitude

by The Reverend Laurie Brubaker Davis

Psalm 116:1-13, 17-19
Philippians 4:1-7

21 to 10. Who knows what I'm talking about? Raise your hands? Who is feeling extreme gratitude for this Ohio State University victory over Michigan? OK, not everyone. You know, I have to confess, being an Ohio immigrant, not born and raised here, but transplanted to the Buckeye State about 17 years ago, I never cease to be amazed by the extreme enthusiasm and loyalty shared by so many (not all) for The Ohio State Buckeyes. Our eldest daughter Emily, who spent the last four years flying back and forth, from Ohio to California while she was in college, tells us, that as she would make her way to the designated gate for the final leg of her journey home – whether Denver, Detroit, Minneapolis, or Dallas, she never really needed to check the gate number as she got close. It was always the gate, winter, spring or fall, where the people were sporting the unmistakable crimson and grey ball caps, hooded sweatshirts, and T-Shirts of The Ohio State Buckeyes.

There seems to be nothing half-way about Buckeye fans—University of Michigan fans—or Cincinnati Bengal fans. There's no doubt: We know how to be extreme about some things. But what about gratitude? How extreme is our gratitude? And what does "Extreme Gratitude" look like? It may look different than we think. Certainly it begins with being thankful for the *good* things God

has given us. There are so many that we take for granted every day: the gift of life and breath itself, the beauty of the earth, the miracle of the human body, clean air, good water, plenty of food, a bed to sleep in, people who love and care for us, our land of the free and home of the brave. And there are so many, many more. The practice of naming our blessings, large and small, and thanking God specifically for them, brings us closer to God and expands our capacity for gratitude.

I can tell you this from my own experience of keeping a gratitude journal for the last seven years. The concept is simple. Every day you write down five things—five specific things, thoughts, memories, experiences, for which you were thankful during that day. Sometimes I let two, three, or even four days go by and then catch it up. But this practice has helped my faith to grow. Hopefully this Thursday, on Thanksgiving Day, when everyone is gathered, you might take a moment for each person to say a word or a sentence naming something, someone he or she is feeling grateful for. That would be a great thing to do.

However, if as Christians, our gratitude horizon ends there, we are only half way toward gospel gratitude, or as I'm calling it "Extreme Gratitude." If we are grateful only for the good things and then just try to forget, ignore, or accept the bad things, we are cutting short the block and tackle of the gospel gratitude to which God is calling us. This is the kind of gratitude that can grow us into the persons and the world God came to save.

At first glance, this "be grateful for the good, try to get around or forget the bad" seems quite natural. And I will confess, for these seven years of gratitude journal keeping, that's pretty much the approach I've taken. Actually, to be honest, in my whole life, that is my preferred mode of operation. Ask my husband or my children, or anyone that has ever camped with me. From the age of three, I began hiking with my three older siblings and parents, and eager to keep up with, and out-do, the "can-do" Brubaker attitude. Early on, we were taught the first rule of camping is not to complain, and to choose to look on the bright side.

I learned that lesson so very well, that about 23 years later, when my husband Bob and I were doing a cross country bicycle tour in the state of Oregon, where it has a tendency to rain, I surprised him with a memorable retort in the middle of a very rainy night. We had chosen our tent site unwisely. And the rain poured and poured on our little backpack tent. Bob woke up in the middle of the night horrified to discover that half of our sleeping bag had become, not just damp, but totally soaked with rain. Of course, I was sound asleep, so he woke me up and said, "Honey, look, our sleeping bag is soaked! We've got to do something!" To which I famously replied, "Just go to the dry part of the sleeping bag" and went back to sleep.

Yes, expanding the practice of gratitude into the wet side, the dark side, the scary side, is hard for me. But I don't think I am alone here. As Henri Nouwen has written, "It is hard precisely because it challenges me to face the painful moments—experiences of rejection and abandonment, feelings of loss and failure—and gradually to discover in them the pruning hands of God purifying my heart for deeper love, stronger hope, and broader faith.... Pruning means cutting, reshaping, removing what diminishes vitality." ("All is Grace" p.40 by Henri J. M. Nouwen, in *Weavings*, Vol. VII, No. 6.)

This is the other half of “Extreme Gratitude.” And this is what I hear God calling us to work on here today. You and I know there is nothing half-way about our God. Our God became flesh in the form of a particular man named Jesus, to show us the way, the truth and the life. Talk about extreme. The stuff that Jesus said and did was so extreme he didn’t last long on this earth. Jesus blazed with a love so powerful, anyone who came into contact with him did not go away unchanged. Jesus’ love pushed the boundaries and the limits of just what God’s love could really do. Jesus showed us a kind of love that never made a detour or looked away when things got bad—a love that embraces our tears, our pain, our mistakes, our dead ends. If you are hurting today, you came to the right place. If you are out of work, out of time, out of money, out of patience, out of ideas, or just out of sorts, you came to the right place.

Take a look at what’s in the center of our communion table. That’s right. It’s not a yellow happy face. Our doxology is not “Don’t worry...be happy.” No. What do we see there? It’s the cross. Even though we know in our heads that the cross is the main symbol of our faith, we may forget its extreme challenge, its awesome and fearsome invitation. The cross doesn’t tell us to go around and pretend we don’t hurt. The cross doesn’t tell us to avoid the mess we’ve made of our lives or of a relationship. The cross doesn’t tell us to just keep running and running so we don’t really have to think or feel about any one thing for very long. The cross doesn’t tell us if we follow Christ all our problems will go away, and we will be happier and richer and thinner and more popular. If that’s what you were hoping for, you came to the wrong place.

The cross invites us to find hope where we see pain, and to reaffirm the resurrection where we see death. The cross, the empty cross, calls us out of whatever tomb may be binding us up today—whether it’s the tomb of regret or the tomb of resentment—whether it’s the tomb of old wounds we’d rather keep licking than give to God to heal and make new. The cross calls for “Extreme Gratitude.” This is the kind of gratitude that teaches us to trust that every moment of our life can be claimed as the way of the cross that leads to new life. That’s right every moment of our life.

There’s nothing halfway about Psalm 116, which we call a Psalm of Thanksgiving. Did you hear how the psalmist admits to God that he called everyone a liar? Did you hear him spell out to God the absolute darkness, despair, pit of terror he had been through? Instead of licking his wounds, covering them over, he lays them open in detail, before God.

There’s nothing halfway about the Apostle Paul. Perhaps that is why he got called on his way to Damascus to turn his extreme personality around to the Extreme Gratitude approach to life. Our scripture passage today is a prime example. Paul pulls no punches with the leaders of the church in Philippi, two of whom happen to be women, who are having some kind of conflict. He addresses it head on. And then he launches into this crazy line: Rejoice, always. Again I say rejoice. Do not worry about anything? This whole letter is infused with joy. What kind of world is he living in?

We happen to know Paul was writing from a jail cell. Paul, whose work was under attack by competitors. Paul, had been working for at least 20 years when he wrote this and continually suffered all kinds of physical and mental duress. Paul’s joy, jumping off the pages of this letter, comes out of the darkness, the pain, and the trials that his extreme faith and extreme gratitude have borne. He captures this paradox of our faith even in that 6th verse: “And the peace of God,

which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” He describes the experience of the peace of God with a military word “guard” which more literally means “sentry” in the Greek.

There’s nothing halfway about Psalm 116. There is nothing halfway about Jesus’ life on this earth or Paul’s faith in Christ. These scriptures help us to see the shape of “Extreme Gratitude.”

The story of how our national holiday called “Thanksgiving” came to be also illustrated this dynamic of “Extreme Gratitude.” The original story from 1621, by the English calendar, centers around a small band of white settlers who were saved from starvation by the significant help and cooperation from the Wampanoags. Their meal, we call “The First Thanksgiving.” But it wasn’t until 1789 when George Washington, our first President, actually proclaimed the day as Thanksgiving for all Americans, and that was to celebrate winning freedom from England in the American revolution.

The third significant layering of this holiday came when President Lincoln in 1863 declared the last Thursday of November to be Thanksgiving Day—hoping the holiday would bring a spirit of unity to a nation broken in two over the practice of slavery. The threat of starvation, the Revolutionary and Civil Wars: Those are the back stories behind the turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie we look forward to this Thursday. Extreme stories, extreme gratitude from moments where we were on the edge of annihilation, not once, but three times.

I will conclude this sermon with an extreme story. A true story that illustrates for me, the ultimate in “Extreme Gratitude” exemplified in the life of Etty Hillesum. Etty was a 27-year-old Jewish woman living in Amsterdam in 1941. At a time when the Nazi takeover was inspiring terror among Dutch Jews, Etty Hillesum underwent an amazing inner transformation in the direction of freedom and joy. By April of 1942 they were forced to wear the Star of David, and the wholesale deportation began later that spring. Finally in August 1942 she was consigned with her family to the internment camp of Westerbork, from which Jews were deported to Auschwitz on a weekly basis. Etty stayed in the camp until September 1943. In the midst of the squalor, the confinement, the fear, she praised God for life, for beauty, for the secure refuge of her soul. Amazingly, her prayers in these last days of her life in the prison camp were lavish expressions of gratitude. She wrote:

You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your Heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer.

Etty’s spirit continued to burn brightly even to the very end. She stepped onto the deportation train “talking gaily, smiling, a kind word for everyone she met on the way, full of sparkling humor, perhaps just a touch of sadness,” as the chronicler of her last day in the camp describes. Later, some farmers along the train route discovered a postcard she had thrown out of the train. “We have left the camp singing,” it said. Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943 (from Judith

Smith's book review of *An Interrupted Life—The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43* translated by J.G. Gaarlandt).

Meister Eckhart wrote, "There are plenty to follow our Lord halfway, but not the other half." What about us? How far are we willing to follow our Lord? What have we been holding back from God? How extreme is our gratitude this year? Let us end this sermon by singing together this stanza from the hymn, God of the Sparrow.

God of the rainbow

God of the cross

God of the empty grave

How does the creature say Grace

How does the creature say Thanks.