

“The Great Thanksgiving”

*A sermon preached on Matthew 6:25-33 by Emily Hull McGee
on November 418, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

Josh and I have tried to create a daily habit of waking up a little earlier than we must each morning. I say ‘try,’ because some mornings we fail! But our attempts, however imperfect, intend to ground our mornings in quiet and mutuality over a cup of strong coffee as the day begins.

We succeeded in doing so on Monday this week, arising early and silently around the preschooler who had found her way into our bed during the night. Josh filled our two steaming mugs, and we sat together gratefully in those pre-dawn moments. It was exactly what we needed to start the day. I think I even named it aloud with delight: “this is so nice!”

What was I thinking?! For in the span of the next two hours, it would all unravel. We’d hear the skies open up and the rain begin to pour. We’d go downstairs to find that our dog, Knox, had gotten sick in the night and thrown up a dozen places around the house. We’d go fetch the laundry in the basement to find it flooded, as that rainstorm hadn’t just fallen on the house but risen up into it — yet again — from the pipes below. We’d wake up our kids to find they’d all risen on the wrong side of the bed, each one bursting into tears for some terrible injustice they were experiencing, like being out of the only cereal he wanted to eat, or looking at her wrong, or not yet washing the robot shirt he wanted to wear. I’d realize that the apparent mistake of trying to wear heels in your late thirties on a Sunday had led to a stabbing pain in the ball of my right foot on a Monday. Wet, frazzled, anxious, angry, worried, exhausted, limping, and late, I texted Amy Cook as I left my house to

let her know where I was, saying, “it has been the Monday-est Monday that ever Monday-ed!” When I finally arrived at the office, I griped about my morning to Amy, sat down in a huff, opened my laptop to begin the week’s work, and realized with a pit in my stomach: *I have to write a sermon this week about giving thanks*. Needless to say, gratitude was the farthest emotion from my very occupied mind.

Now I don’t share this embarrassing admission with you to suggest that my life is terribly hard — it’s not, and I am privileged beyond what I deserve with resources and people and health and opportunities in abundance. Nor am I asking you to feel sorry for me — truly! But what I hope that my oversight illustrates for us all is how quickly gratefulness for what we have can turn into grim frustration for what we don’t, even in the span of a couple of hours on a rainy Monday morning.

II.

I recently started reading a new book called *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*.¹ (I picked it up because of my sermon this week, but perhaps its timing is providential!) As she begins, author Diana Butler Bass grounds her work on gratitude in a 2014 study on American religion and spirituality, in which a question was posed to its respondents that said this: “How often do you feel a strong sense of gratitude or thankfulness? Would you say at least once a week, once or twice a month, several times a year, seldom, or never?” She was shocked at the response, for some 78% of respondents said they had felt strongly thankful in the past

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*.

week!² “A wave of guilt engulfed me,” she said. “I was not sure I was one of them! ... [It was] as if... I had flunked the gratitude exam.”³

But just imagine, eight of the 10 of us might claim to have experienced strong gratitude this week! Somehow in our running around, rainy Monday, stressful and anxious and fearful world, we are still finding space for gratitude. How is that? Where might such a spirit of gratitude come from? And on this Sunday when the calendar gives us space to prepare our minds and our hearts — if not our bellies! — for Thanksgiving, what does it take to cultivate thanksgiving in our everyday lives? I’m not just talking about the one time a year, the actual holiday and all the traditions that spice and flavor it with a dash of family dysfunction and a heap of nostalgia baked in for good measure, but rather the spirit this season fosters, a spirit of sustained gratitude in an extended season of giving thanks. I wonder: how might we live as thanksgiving people?

III.

“Don’t worry about your life,” Jesus says to us from the mount today in these words of challenge for this week and any week. I want to read to you *The Message* translation, which says it profoundly well:

“If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. “Has anyone by fussing

² Pew Research Center, “2014 Religious Landscape Study,” May 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>, as quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, p. xiv.

³ Butler Bass, p. xiv.

in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”⁴

It's as if Jesus sees right into our human nature. He knows how we instinctively respond to scarcity and struggle, he understands that fears and anxieties will surface. But instead of letting it be, he invites us into a transformative alternative: a choice, that as *The Message* says, focuses less on getting and more on God's giving, a choice between dwelling in regret and worry and being set free within God's abundance.

III.

Social psychologists call it the 'headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry'; that is, our ever-present tendency to focus far more on whatever obstacles or headwinds we face in our life, and to focus far less on the blessings or tailwinds we've been given to use. The headwinds are obvious places of resistance or struggle in our lives, literally the 'wind in our faces.' Tailwinds, on the other hand, are the opposite, literally the 'wind at our backs,' nearly invisible due to the long-assumed advantages they give us.⁵ It's probably no

⁴ The Message translation of today's scripture passage.

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, p82-86.

surprise that the bent of our human nature is towards that which we struggle, that which is harder to overcome, that which provides a barrier or challenge to thriving in life. Too long a look at one's headwinds can lead to bitterness about the struggle, resentment towards those in the path ahead, and envy towards another who doesn't share in that struggle.⁶ In short, headwinds are barriers, tailwinds are blessings; "focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness; but focusing on tailwinds breeds thanksgiving."⁷

The great Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen understood what that shift demanded, the movement from resentment and anger and fear and frustration into gratitude. He said, "to be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives — the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections — that requires hard spiritual work. Still we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for."⁸

So what, then, does God ask us to do in order to be thanksgiving people? How might we release ourselves from the worry and the anxiety over our daily provisions such that we notice the ways that God is providing even

⁶ Butler Bass, p83.

⁷ "A Brief Theology of Thanksgiving" from SALT Commentary, <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/11/14/a-brief-theology-of-thanksgiving>

⁸ Quoted in Butler Bass, p39-40.

still? Can we look past the headwinds so that we might see anew the many tailwinds that exist in our lives?

For years, people have turned to a variety of habits and practices to enhance and enlarge their gratitude to God. Some people create a gratitude journal, space to daily notice and record the small gifts of their lives: the body that wakes you up and moves about your day, the bed where they rest comfortably at night, the pause in the day for a friend, the meal that nourishes and sustains. Others use the space for prayer, for direct thanksgiving to the source of gift and grace. Some reflect on the past, others look to the future. You may have even more ideas! But whatever your practice of gratitude might be, the goal is always to awaken to the blessings and gifts of this life, as simple or as profound as they may be, and to hold gratitude to God from whom all blessings flow.

IV.

I wish I could tell you that recognizing my need for gratitude would have turned my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad Monday morning into a more thankful week ahead. I confess that it did not. My schedule got busy, meetings ran long, emails piled up, emotions ran high, kids got sick and then sick again, plumbing bills mounted, the rain kept falling, and my attitude struggled to improve as each day passed. But thanks be to God that God did not let me stay there. For I was gathered up in gratitude through others, you who could see what I could not. This week, I had conversations with many of you who have struggled recently with your health, with the literal or the emotional storms of life. And yet you have reminded me that God's grace has always covered you, despite evidence to the contrary. I was forced to slow

down a bit and notice God's created world, coloring and falling and changing and preparing for new life all around me. I prepared for us to say thank you to the leaders whose commitments to our church have led us to this very moment. And I was reminded yet again of those who bear witness to the gratitude they have for God, even in the depths of grief.

One such witness is my dear friend and former college roommate, Courtney, who lost her father this week. The cancer that stole his days crept in with haste and a vengeance, robbing him and them of these latter years of his life filled with rest, family, grandkids, and love. Yet cancer is no stranger to their family. It was several years ago that ovarian cancer depleted Courtney of her capacity to conceive, and then a few years after that when Stage Three colon cancer invaded Courtney's young life and disrupted what she was trying to rebuild. Yet through it all, this dear friend of mine has remained steadfast; her hope in God's future unbound by the headwinds of her life; her gratitude for the grace of this life in abundance. Our roommates from college texted with her this week, and that gratitude of hers was repeated time and time again: gratefulness to have shared life with her dad, gratefulness to God for this season, gratefulness to each of us for offering our care. It was astounding, convicting, faithful, beautiful.

Immediately after worship today, I will hop in my car and journey to Courtney's side, as a community of friends and family will gather to remember and celebrate Harry's life. And on my drive, quiet with the absence of all that makes my life noisy these days, I will accept God's invitation to consider anew the gifts, the tailwinds, the blessings I've been given. I'll heed Jesus's call to let down my anxieties and worries about these days, turning

my eyes and my spirit instead to the lilies and the sparrows who hold his favor. I'll pray with great thanksgiving for you, dear church, for all the saints who have loved us then and all of you saints who love us even still. In all things, I'll hold in deepest gratitude the God who gifts us with boundless abundance.

That will be my gratitude practice, and I trust that God will use it and make something good of it. What will be **your** practice this day and this week? As you gather in whatever form this Thanksgiving, what will be your practices of gratitude? How might you recognize the tailwinds of your life, those blessings God has given freely to you? Where will you focus less on getting so you can focus more on how God is giving?

That question sits before each of us this day. And the promise of Jesus is clear: "do not worry!" Might we live into such a promise, for gratitude abounds. Amen!