

“Thanks”
Psalm 100
Philippians 4:4-7
Sermon Series: Three Essential Prayers
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Psalm 100 (CEB)

*Shout triumphantly to the Lord, all the earth!
 Serve the Lord with celebration!
 Come before him with shouts of joy!
 Know that the Lord is God—
 he made us; we belong to him.
 We are his people,
 the sheep of his own pasture.
 Enter his gates with thanks;
 enter his courtyards with praise!
 Thank him! Bless his name!
 Because the Lord is good,
 his loyal love lasts forever;
 his faithfulness lasts generation after generation.*

Philippians 4:4-7 (CEB)

*Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad!
 Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people.
 The Lord is near.
 Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your
 prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks.
 Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds
 safe in Christ Jesus.*

We continue today on a three week sermon series based on Anne Lamott's book, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Last week I shared that Lamott's simple definition of a prayer is “Communication from one’s heart to God” and she believes in keeping prayer simple.

We heard about the prayer that she calls the first great prayer,
the prayer where our hearts say “Help” to God.

While it’s not an easy prayer to pray at times because it opens us up to feelings we’d rather ignore--feelings of helplessness or vulnerability or uncertainty--it’s a powerful prayer to learn to say.

And in praying it, our hearts can be changed.

Our perspectives can shift.

We can lean into the truth that we were not designed to do this life thing alone.

Thanks be to God!

Rather, our God can sympathize with us.

Meet us where we are.

Ease the burdens we carry.

Today, we turn to Lamott’s second simple prayer, the heart conversation that says, “Thanks.”

Now like many words, the tone in which we choose to say this can immediately point to the intended meaning of the person speaking it.

For example, we’ve probably all experienced someone who says “thanks” after receiving a gift or benefiting from a kind gesture, but the tone clarifies that they’re really not that thankful.

They’re just going through the motions that our polite culture demands of us.

“Thanks,” we hear, with sarcasm or boredom practically dripping off of each letter.

But today...today I want you to hear this prayer in the fullest expression it can offer.

THANK YOU.

Thankyouthankyouthankyou.

Thanks!!!

Said with sincerity, this simple prayer might be uttered many more times in one’s day than last week’s prayer is. Anne Lamott said that gratitude in the form of thanks is most of the time that

“rush of relief that I dodged a bullet--the highway patrol guy didn’t notice me speed by, or the dog didn’t get hit by someone else speeding by.” (p. 43)

“But the second and third levels of the second great prayer are said with a heaving exhalation of breath, the expulsion of bellows--THANK you, whooooosh.

The constables found my passport. The brakes held. The proliferation of white blood cells was about allergies, not leukemia; the pediatrician canceled the appointment with the head of oncology and instead recommended Benadryl. Oh my God: thanks." (p. 44)

Earlier Thomas read the exuberant words of the psalmist who tells us to shout triumphantly to God!

To thank him!

To bless his name!

Because the Lord is good.

And it is easier to do this when things are going well.

When everything is going as we'd hoped or as we experience new unexpected joys.

At the little things we offer that happy word of "thanks" even if we know God really didn't empty that parking space just for us.

But in that moment, we feel grateful and slide our car in that space, feeling as though the world is on our side.

And that can help a whole day to feel brighter.

But we learn as we get older that things can quickly go from good to bad, easy to hard. Lamott, who is quite honest about her many struggles with addiction and depression, says,

"Most of us figure out by a certain age--some of us later than others--that life unspools in cycles, some lovely, some painful, but in no predictable order. So you could have lovely, painful, and painful again, which I think we all agree is not at all fair. You don't have to like it, and you are always welcome to file a brief with the Complaints Department. But if you've been around for a while, you know that much of the time, if you are patient and are paying attention, you will see that God will restore what the locusts have taken away." (p. 50)

Paying attention.

When we pay attention, even to things that aren't great, our perspectives can shift.

We experience a new way of thinking about something or someone.

Or we might experience a bit of a revelation.

And then even in the midst of hard, we might find ourselves offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

Lamott says she says “Thanks” because

“Revelation has shown me things that are miserable that somehow I may get to sidestep; or that are miserable but that prayer and friends help me find a way through; or that are painful and beautiful in ways that make your heart ache, [and that then] draw you closer forever to the comrades who have walked with you.

Without revelation and reframing, life can seem like an endless desert of danger with scratchy sand in your shoes, and yet if we remember or are reminded to pay attention, we find so many sources of hidden water, so many bits and chips and washes of color, in a weed or the gravel or a sunrise. There are so many ways to sweep the sand off our feet. So we say, ‘Oh my God. Thanks.’” (p. 53)

When we pay attention, we may feel more grateful--we may utter the prayer of “Thanks” more, and then slowly, our behaviors change.

Think about it--when you’re feeling happy and thankful, might you be more likely to let someone cut in front of you in traffic? Or go before you in line?

If you’re mindful of the great thing that’s just happened to you, will your gratitude show up as a smile as you walk through the grocery store?

Might your smile cause another person to smile?

Lamott says that **“Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior.”**

In other words, in my words, gratitude doesn’t get to just buoy us.

It doesn’t exist only so we feel better.

It should affect how we interact with those around us.

It should help to lift others up, too.

It should shape us into different, better versions of ourselves.

But do we let it?

When we consider the radical, saving love Jesus has for us, do we let it alter how we live out our days--

--How we treat those around us--our family members, our friends, and the strangers we pass on the street?

And will we let it define us in all the best ways possible?

Now much like DIY projects I talked about last week, saying that you're #blessed on social media has become trendy.

Many critique it being as an easy way to essentially brag about your latest vacation or new car or expensive meal out.

And for some people it might be that.

But I think if we are paying attention and looking around and feeling blessed AND grateful, we might behave in more Christ-like ways.

Because we're more mindful of our gratitude.

And we might remember deep in our bones that we are all God's beloved children, so we better take care of one another.

So will we let gratitude root itself in our hearts and then push us to behave better?

Anne Lamott offers us some examples from one of her clergy friends.

"Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit who founded Homeboy Industries, a program that helps former gang members reenter society, reminds us that gratitude is not about waving your arms in praise on Christian TV shows. That's what we think God would want, because we would love to have a few hundred people applauding us, waving their arms like palm fronds.

Instead, God's idea of a good time is to see us picking up litter. God must love to see us serving food...or hear us calling our [cousin who no one else in the family talks to because of their addiction struggles]..." Lamott believes "that God's idea of a good time is also to see us sharing what we have worked so hard to have..."
(p. 58-59)

And the examples could go on and on.

The things that we might do for others out of our own sense of gratitude.

Gratitude for God's grace.

God's love.

God's forgiveness.

All these gifts that can feel too big to comprehend many days.

But when we experience them, we can't help but say, "Thanks, God."

“Thank you.”

And then we hopefully roll up our sleeves and get to work making this world a better place through our actions, small and big.

As we are reminded in Philippians,

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad!

Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people.

The Lord is near.

Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks.

So friends, how will your gratitude take shape this week?

Where will your prayer of “Thanks” lead you to action?

And if you’re not quite sure yet, can you at least commit to paying attention?

May this week’s heart conversation with God not only propel us closer to God, but also to one another.