

Gratitude to God for the gift of life and the abundant life we have in Christ is the greatest reason we have to provide substantial support for our annual church budget that funds our mission and ministry in the coming year. The Bible is full of examples of human expressions of gratitude to God. As you hear these biblical examples of gratitude I invite you to think of the gratitude you have for God in your life. This is a good exercise to engage in the midst of our stewardship focus this month. In addition, it is a good exercise to do as we prepare our hearts for the Thanksgiving holiday this week.

Let's start off at looking at the words of gratitude by King Solomon as recorded in I Kings 8:14-21.

¹⁴ Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood. ¹⁵ He said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David, saying, ¹⁶ ‘Since the day that I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city from any of the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, that my name might be there; but I chose David to be over my people Israel.’

¹⁷ My father David had it in mind to build a house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel.

¹⁸ But the LORD said to my father David, ‘You did well to consider building a house for my name; ¹⁹ nevertheless you shall not build the house, but your son who shall be born to you shall build the house for my name.’ ²⁰ Now the LORD has upheld the promise that he made; for I have risen in the place of my father David; I sit on the throne of Israel, as the LORD promised, and have built the house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. ²¹ There I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

Solomon has just completed building the Temple for God in Jerusalem. This is all happening about 900 years before the time of Jesus or about 3,000 years ago. To cap off the dedication of the Temple the Ark of the Covenant is brought in to be placed in the center of the Temple. Do you remember what is in the Ark of the Covenant? Yes, that is right, the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments that Moses received from God on Mount Sinai. After decades of wandering in the wilderness and after centuries of establishing the nation Israel in the Promised Land the Ten Commandments can finally be placed in the Temple dedicated to God in the Jerusalem. Solomon is grateful that God has been with the people over the centuries which have lead up to this day of celebrating the Temple's completion and dedication.

Think of how God has been with us as a congregation since the 1930's as we anticipate our mission and ministry in Benson/Dundee area in 2019 as we dedicate our commitment cards at the altar today. We give thanks for God's presence in congregation's life. Think of how God has been with your family over the generations as you prepare to gather with family for a Thanksgiving celebration this week. We give thanks for God's presence in our daily life.

Let's look at another Old Testament passage where gratitude is expressed to God. It is found in Daniel 2:19-23.

¹⁹ Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

²⁰ Daniel said: "Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power belong to God.

²¹ God changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; God gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.

²² God reveals deep and hidden things; God knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him.

²³ To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise,

for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered."

This is a prayer of gratitude by Daniel in a very special circumstance.

King Nebuchadnezzar had a disturbing dream. He turns to the prophets in his royal court for interpretation. But he demands that the prophets tell him the content of his dream and then their interpretation. The King declares he will kill all the prophets if they can't do so. The wise men of the royal court know this request is beyond their ability so in desperation they seek out Daniel, a foreigner of some renown residing in their land, to see if he can help. The dream and its interpretation are revealed to Daniel in a vision. After Daniel receives the vision he shares his words of gratitude to God.

How has God given you visions that you have needed at various times in your life. When it happens we, like Daniel, are to express our gratitude toward God. I have never been able to interpret dreams. That would be a cool gift to have. My gift is much more mundane. Repeatedly, God has given me the vision to jump-start building projects that have been languishing for one reason or another. The first church I served was a struggling urban church in Chicago. I arrived in 1981 and their heyday had been in the 40's and 50's. They had been growing smaller for over a quarter century. Their bathrooms, off the fellowship hall, had not been renovated in over fifty years and therefore the toilets were oftentimes backed up. That was a real nuisance and inconvenience.

At this time some new members that joined the church had a vision that came to pass and funds were raised in one evening to completely renovate those bathrooms. Like Daniel, I expressed my gratitude for the new toilets in those renovated bathrooms back in the early 80's. The languishing projects waiting for me in the various churches I have served have differed in scale but a vision to complete the projects has always come to pass. For that, I give thanks to God. How has God given you the vision that you have needed at various points in your life to move forward? We give thanks to God for those timely visions in our lives.

As we look at our gospel lesson from Luke we see an expression of gratitude of a different sort. Luke 7:37f.

³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

We are told that this woman has lived a sin-filled life. Her sin is not specified but the text indicates that her sinfulness is abundantly clear to all. It seems to be abundantly clear to the woman as well. No doubt this woman has heard that Jesus has the power to forgive sins, change the hearts of people, and give them a new start in life.

She knelt at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair.

Did you hear that? She was weeping enough tears to bathe his feet. That is a lot of crying. That is an outpouring of regret for the life she has lived. Jesus sees her authentic change of heart. Then she continued by kissing his feet and anointing them with oil. Jesus tells the woman that her sins are forgiven and tells her to go in peace. She has been given a new start in life.

Think of God's grace and forgiveness in your life. My most reoccurring sin is irritability and it arrives when stress in my life increases. Some people thrive on stress as it energizes them and brings out their best. That is not the case for me. I try not to procrastinate for just that reason. It is one of the reasons I like all the regularly scheduled meetings at church including Church Council the third Monday of every other month, although it will be the fourth Monday of this month since we have Church Conference today with our District Superintendent at St Paul's in Papillion. It helps me to be on schedule and plan accordingly. I can deal with a huge project as long as I have a good timeline to accomplish it. But give me something small, like being in a car at end of a vacation day when a hotel room can't be found and I feel the stress grow and my irritability grows in expressions that are not nice to those around me. Then after being irritable I feel like weeping tears at the feet of Jesus with a repentant heart. On an ongoing basis we each know of our unique need for God's grace in our lives. We need to express gratitude to God for the forgiving grace of Jesus that gives us a new start whenever we need it.

We see expressions of gratitude by Solomon, Daniel, the woman at the feet of Jesus. They all provide us with examples for a life of gratitude that we can live as disciples of Christ. Gratitude to God for the gift of life and the abundant life we have in Christ is the greatest reason we have to provide substantial support for our annual church budget that funds our mission and ministry that shares the good news of God's grace and love.

As you take a moment to ponder your gratitude in life I invite to hear how some of the Catholic churches in Las Vegas deal with the unique offerings of gratitude they get each week. A number of worshippers at will give casino chips rather than cash when the plate is passed. Since the churches get chips from many different casinos they devised a method to collect the offerings. They send all their collected chips to a nearby Franciscan monastery for sorting and then the chips are taken to the casinos of origin and cashed in. This is done by "chip monks!"

Gratitude, what are you thankful for in life?