**Anchored in Hope: Awash in Gratitude**

**Matthew 6:19-21**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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Some time recently, I must have blinked and suddenly it is the weekend before Thanksgiving. College students, including my own, are headed home, our altar is stunning thanks to the efforts of Barb Higdon, turkeys are on sale at Kroger and Meijer, and the first scattering of snow covers the unraked leaves on our lawns.  This coming week, many of us will take a couple of days to slow down and turn our hearts and minds to a celebration of all that God has given us, all that we have to be grateful for.

I read an interesting article the other day published in an online magazine by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley.  The author, Robert Emmons, pointed out something about Thanksgiving that I hadn’t entirely realized before. This holiday, he says, “was born and grew out of hard times. The first Thanksgiving took place after nearly half the pilgrims died from a rough winter and year. It became a national holiday in 1863 in the middle of the Civil War and was moved to its current date in the 1930s following the Depression.”

I knew, of course, the story of the First Thanksgiving, but I hadn’t thought about that whole series of events that have made it the holiday we now observe - or realized that each of those events happened in a time of crisis. It was a good reminder that while most of the time we feel a certain superficial appreciation for what we have in life - if asked, we can easily name a handful of gifts in our lives for which we are grateful - there are also moments when that appreciation is suddenly much deeper.  When we recognize with a new sense of clarity or almost surprise how incredibly blessed we are.

Like our country, ironically, it is often in the most challenging times that we reach that place of deeper gratitude.  Over the last six weeks, we have heard testimonies from different individuals and couples about what they love about our church and why they give.  A consistent theme in what they have said to us has been that the church has been important for them in times of crisis. Shonagh spoke to us about the importance of this church for her as she was healing from a bad experience in a previous church, as she made her way through the end of her marriage, and as she has journeyed through the last two years as a divorced immigrant and woman of color.  Ted talked about how the church supported him through a particularly challenging time in his family life. And Dave and Pam Gee spoke of the help and support they’ve received from their small group as they have all raised children and lost parents together.

So, what else inspires this kind of deep gratitude in us?  Again, looking at the stories we’ve heard in the testimonies recently, I found another common theme was impact.  We are deeply grateful when something impacts someone or something we care about. We heard Bethany Christoff speak about what it meant to her when her little boys could say “that’s my church”.  And Nancy Quay told us her memory of an Easter morning when she saw a member of our congregation welcome a homeless visitor and do whatever she could to help him feel included in our Easter celebrations.  Again, the Gees spoke about the incredible opportunities for travel and service that their children experienced through growing up in our church.

And then there are those things that somehow open up our hearts a little bit more.  Moments when gratitude is born of the almost physical sensation of joy. Ted Brokaw talked about this when he described the experience of singing with the choir.  Nancy and Sherry spoke of the rush of seeing children appear out of nowhere as they headed toward the chancel for the Time with the Children in worship. And just a few minutes ago, we heard Kelly share this kind of story from when their son, Ben, was born.

So, yes, there are these experiences we have which bring us to a deeper awareness of how blessed we are.  And, as we’ve heard from Ted, Shonagh, Dave and Pam, Nancy and Sherry, Bethany, and, today, Jim and Kelly, those experiences of gratitude seem to spark generosity. These people who shared their testimonies all spoke of gratitude as why they give to the church.  Conversely, generosity also leads to gratitude. Recent studies in neuroscience demonstrate that, like two sides of the same coin, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two.  Gratitude - appreciation for what we have received from God, from the Church, from friends or even strangers - leads us to give more of ourselves, our time, and our money. At the same time, when we are generous, we also become more grateful.

So, why is that?  What creates this symbiosis between gratitude and generosity?  I think that question brings us back to the theme of this whole sermon series.  I believe that gratitude inspires generosity and generosity inspires gratitude because they both offer us hope.  We tell the story of the first Thanksgiving because it is a story of hope. Hope that those pilgrims who survived the miserable ocean journey to America and the first year in this new land would continue to survive with the new skills they learned from the indigenous people.  We are touched by the stories offered to us by others in this congregation because they are stories of hope. Hope that a broken heart can heal. Hope that our children will make a difference in the world. Hope that we can overcome our prejudices and our fears and learn to welcome each other into Christian community.  Hope that we are not alone in our challenges or our doubts. Hope that the money and the time we give will have a lasting impact in places as far away as Costa Rica or Kenya or as close as the portico of the church where our homeless guests sleep.

Centuries ago, Jesus sat on the side of a mountain and gave a sermon in which he taught so much of what it means to be faithful.  He spoke of being blessed and how often those who are blessed are not those with wealth or prestige but the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.  He went on to say that we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We are the bearers of hope into the world. And toward the end of that long and amazing sermon, he spoke about giving, telling us not to put our money into earthly and material things but into those things that reflect the kingdom of God. Where your treasure is,” he said, there will your heart be also.” In other words, put your treasure into what you hope for, what you dream of, what you love and value.

Over the last few weeks, I have encouraged you to look at how you might invest the treasures in your life in ways that reflect what really matters to you.  Your time as you consider how to grow in faith and knowledge, your energy as you look at how to serve God and neighbor, and your money as you consider how you can take a next step in your giving to the church budget.

Today, as we celebrate Thanksgiving together, as we take time to experience with deep gratitude all that God has given to us, we are also going to dedicate our next steps in faith to God.  In part, that means offering our financial pledges to the church. This is our opportunity to take some part of our treasure and, rather than putting it in the bank where it will grow slowly but have little impact on the world, instead offer it to God through the church - the church where real transformation happens. Where hope is transformed into justice and food and learning and homes.

However, I invite you to not only make your financial pledge but to make a pledge in other parts of your faith journey, as well.  On the chairs/pews, you’ll find index cards where you can write down other next steps you plan to take - in your worship and prayer life, in learning, in service, or in faithful living.

And so I invite you now, as I did several weeks ago, to take a few moments and pray.  Pray about what you are grateful for - the blessings God has given you that open your heart and give you hope.  And then to pray about what you really hope for for the future. What kind of world do you hope will exist for your children and your grandchildren?  What kind of church do you hope this church will be? And what are you willing to do - what next steps are you willing to take in prayer and worship, service, faithful living, and financial giving to make that happen?

Take a few moments now as Naki plays to pray and to fill out your pledge card or write down your next steps.  Writing it down is another way of making a commitment real. In a couple of minutes, we will sing and then after the hymn, rather than taking our offering from the pew, I’ll invite you to come forward, like you do when we take Communion, and you can place your cards in the baskets on the tables or on the altar, making a tangible commitment to yourself, to the world, and to God. A financial commitment, a commitment of time, or of energy, or a commitment of your heart.  Please bring your regular offering as well. After you do, you may be seated again and I invite you to say a silent prayer - a prayer of thanksgiving and hope for a better world. Then, at the end, we will all say a prayer of dedication together.

May it be so. Amen.