

“This One Thing”

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Colossians 3:15-17

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ control your hearts – a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom, and with gratitude in your hearts by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Luke 17:11-17

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³ they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!” ¹⁴ When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Weren’t ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

Gratitude. This is the theme I chose for today. I did not plan to talk about giving thanks. Saying “Thank you” can become so automatic. We have been trained to be thankful. The 3-year-old receives a gift and we prompt, “What do you say?” Someone holds the door for you, a server brings your meal. You say, “Thank you,” then the moment is forgotten, as you return to conversation or begin eating.

The words *grateful* and *thankful* are often used interchangeably. No one is going to correct you if you use one instead of the other, yet they are different. Part of my dilemma in preparing this message was that definitions vary wildly. They overlap but, besides that, a defining characteristic used by one person to describe thankfulness is used by someone else to describe gratitude.

One idea that resonated with me is that we may feel thankful for people’s presence and actions in our lives, but gratitude goes deeper. It is a state of being. Thankfulness is a first step that we build on, so that gratitude becomes a basic part of our everyday lives. Saying “thank you” is a good action but gratitude can become a way of life.

Let’s see if today’s scriptures help us decipher the difference between thankfulness and gratitude. In Colossians, the author (who writes after the manner of Paul) speaks of living in God’s peace, and of being in accord with others. We can be thankful when we do this. A little further, we are admonished to do everything in Jesus’ name, giving thanks to God as we do so. Giving thanks seems to come as a result of following Jesus’ example. Similarly, when Jesus heals the men of their skin diseases, the Samaritan man thanks Jesus for his return to wholeness and community.

This is consistent with some of what I read elsewhere. Giving or offering thanks is a response to God’s or someone else’s action, or to events in our lives. Someone moves into the left lane so that you can get on the freeway. The old washing machine keeps running. A friend invites you to

share an hour in laughing conversation. The surgery goes well. There's just enough money in the checking account to make it through the month. And we are thankful.

Each week I have been receiving notes of thanks from some of you, letting Martie and me know that you appreciate our efforts in recording services and posting them online. I am thankful for the support you have been giving us!

While it is easy to be thankful when things are going well, it can be harder when the basement floods, the car stops running or pandemic strikes. This is when a practice of gratitude can sustain us. Because while thankfulness is about being pleased and relieved, and expressing it, gratitude is an inner quality, a way of being that goes beyond what did or did not happen in our days.

We might say that gratitude is about cultivating a mindset of wanting, or at least accepting, what you already have. This is the first secret of gratitude: contentment. Being content with the way things are right now can leave you more joyful. You could be cooped up at home because of a pandemic and still feel blessed.

Sometimes the present seems terrible and the future looks bleak. The second secret of gratitude is that you have the power to choose your response to what is happening around you. While in Auschwitz, the Austrian, Viktor Frankl, found that, even there, he had this choice. Whether he would live in misery or in hope was up to him. He later wrote that, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies your power to choose your response." In that prison camp, he discovered the tool that helped him to survive. And, Frankl added, "In your response lies your growth and your freedom."

Not only do we get to decide how we will respond to what happens around us, but we find freedom in our decision to live in wholeness. We grow closer to God and to our best selves when we accept that this is our responsibility.

What do we choose? Will we react with anger and frustration or will we accept that this is simply the way things are for now? Do we look for things to celebrate or do we curse whatever led to this present moment? Do we curl into a ball or do we find ways to laugh and dance and sing?

It would be so easy to shake our fist at the universe, to rant about the government, or to sink into despair. When we are too long alone, we forget that others are also alone. When we yearn for solitude, we may forget the times when we wished we could spend time together. Many of you may be wishing for a return to the old normal, back before masks and social distancing. Before the furloughs, job losses, and threats of bankruptcy. Before crisis left the markets so vulnerable and people so anxious. But this is our life today.

And life is both wonderful and tragic, sometimes following each other, sometimes both in the same moment. Still, we get to decide, will we shield our hearts to keep them from breaking? Or do we risk all – again and again – for the promise of ever more abundant life? Melody Beattie puts it this way:

“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”¹

The key is to keep our focus on living gratefully. More than simply having thankful thoughts, we practice gratitude through the ordinary ways we live each day. And, yes, like any spiritual

discipline, practice is key. Living our gratefulness for the gifts that God is still showering upon us. Gratitude is the way we live out our love and commitment to the ones who mean the most to us. We share experiences together. We accept that God intends for us to lead lives of abundance even during coronavirus. God intends for us to celebrate our connections with others. We still fall in love, still marvel at children's intuition and curiosity, still grieve our losses. And God still abides with us.

Okay, one more thing. In our first lesson, the writer challenges us to live together richly, singing to God with gratitude in our hearts. The "gratitude in our hearts" piece points to something we want to be aware of. I think of that old saw, "The love in your hearts wasn't put there to stay; love isn't love 'til you give it away."

This works for gratitude as well. Some people are grateful in their hearts, like the song we sang, but they only feel the gratitude in private. They don't let it shape their lives. I suggest that it is good to check in with ourselves, now and again, to make sure that our gratitude for the ones we care about and for God's grace in our lives is actually reflected in how we speak and live each day. This too is part of leading lives of abundance.

Amen.

ⁱ Melody Beattie, cited by Susan Rhoads, LCSW, Therapist for "The Difference Between Gratitude and Thankfulness," in Psychiatric Medical Care, psychmc.com/articles/difference-between-gratitude-and-thankfulness (last accessed May 28, 2020).