**Growing Gratitude**

Psalm 138  
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

My son was grateful. The day before he had called and asked if we might go down to the Saints Ticket office on Friday morning and purchase tickets for the Friday night game. The game was sold out with the exception of the Lawn, a grassy area where you can sit with blankets. Aaron had organized a group of 16 people who were intending to travel together on light rail from the University of Minnesota if he could get these lawn tickets. Those particular tickets can only purchased on the day of the game and you can only purchase a maximum of 8 so both Michele and I needed to go. The ticket office opened at 9:00 a.m., but we were unable to get there until 10:00 a.m. Aaron called at 9:15. “I have been told there is a line. Have you gone yet?” In the scheme of things, a Saint Paul Saints game is not that big of a deal, but if you have 16 folks whose Friday night is dependent on your parent’s coming through, you do feel a little pressure. We arrived at the window and purchased the 16 tickets. After texting Aaron about our success, he texted back, “Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.”

Gratitude, of course, tends to come a lot easier when the tickets have been purchased, your friends are looking forward to a fun evening and life has worked out as you had hoped. It is a much bigger challenge to live with gratitude when the news is not what we want to hear, when we encounter disappointment, when troubles are mounting, when the future looks uncertain.

Both the Psalmist and Paul in his letter to the Corinthians anticipate these times of challenge, difficulty, loss and yet insist a spirit of gratitude is not only possible, it is essential. The Psalmist says, “Though I walk in the midst of troubles…” and then goes onto describe how it is even in the face of difficulties he can sing “I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart.” Paul writing to the people of Corinth uses vivid language to convey the challenges these early Christians face, “do not lose heart…even though our outer nature is wasting away…we face momentary afflictions… the tent we live in is destroyed…” none of which sound like descriptions of success at the ticket office and yet Paul says, we nonetheless are called to increase our thanksgiving. “Thank you, thank you, thank you”, for the Psalmist and for Paul, this is much more than an expression of appreciation when success comes our way, it is a way of living given to us in faith.

There is no shortage of situations that can cause us to feel frustrated, discouraged, hopeless, even bitter about our world and our lives. The Psalmist never says what the nature of the troubles faced by the Psalmist is or who precisely the Psalmists experiences as enemies, but those problems and those challenges clearly exist. Paul never says, what it is that might cause the Corinthians to feel like their inner nature is wasting away, nor does he describe their afflictions, but clearly they exist as they do for us. We do know that Paul was often arrested and in jail because Paul was about the business of creating counter cultural communities of faith that posed a threat to Roman imperialism and domination. But, regardless of the afflictions, Paul tells the Corinthians that no matter how challenging life appears, we nonetheless can live with gratitude for what God is doing in our world and lives.

A week ago this past Saturday there were a group of members and friends from Cherokee Park United Church on their knees praying outside of our church. They were also digging holes and putting plants into our new rain garden, which itself can be thought of as an act of prayer, regardless of whether those prayers were given words. Rain gardens are designed to capture the rain off of our roof, so rather than the rain going directly into the streets, down the storm sewers and into the river, the rain will instead be captured in the rain garden pool. In the process the ground absorbs the pollutants that have accumulated on our roof, keeping those pollutants out of the river. One of the new things I learned about rain gardens is that they do not have to be perfect. Our rain garden is designed to capture a 2 inch rain fall, all precisely worked out based on the size of our roof and the size of the garden. Even though we occasionally get more than 2 inches of rain the rain garden will have done its job because the first two inches captures 90 percent more of the pollutants that otherwise would end up in the river.

The gratitude spoken of by the Psalmist and Paul functions much like our rain garden is intended to function. Rather than allow bitterness, discouragement, hopelessness flow out of our lives into the world, it captures those pollutants, leaving us the clear water of hope, trust, and courage. This gratitude, of course, is grounded in the promise of God’s steadfast love, which the Psalmist proclaims “endures forever” and Paul proclaims is revealed in the Risen Christ. One Biblical commentator notes that in many respects the gratitude of faith is an act of defiance and resistance to every form of trouble that we encounter. The gratitude of faith defies the power of loss to define and control our lives. The gratitude of faith resists discouragement feeding our cynicism about life and the world. The gratitude of faith defies systems and powers that insist oppression, injustice, and exploitation will always have the upper hand.

This, of course, is never a solitary effort, individually living grateful lives in the face of troubles, problems and discouragement. Rather, both the Psalmist and Paul look to communities of faith as the place where gratitude is nurtured, strengthened and practiced together. A rain garden is an especially apt metaphor for growing gratitude because there is no single plant cleansing the rain of its pollutants. It is the collection of plants that cleanses the rain, just as it is our common life that enables us to keep alive a defiant spirit of gratitude.

On this Anniversary Sunday we plant gratitude in our garden when we celebrate those who have gone before and those whose faithfulness have made it possible for us to gather today. We plant gratitude every time we say grace giving thanks not only for the food on our tables, but also the migrant workers and farmers who tend the crops, the soil which gives of its bounty, the rain and the sun which nourish the ground. We plant gratitude when we give thanks for the gifts and talents that are shared generously by members of this community of faith. We plant gratitude when we give thanks for children and youth who invite us and encourage us to see the new ways God is speaking.

The Psalmist and the Apostle Paul know that true gratitude is much more than an expression of thankfulness when things have gone our way, the tickets have been purchased and we are looking forward to a fun evening at the game. True gratitude, true thankfulness is a lens through which we view the world enabling us to take a momentary affliction and discover the way this loss, this disappointment might still be used for the Glory of God, contributing to the Realm of God’s justice and love.

As a pastor I have been blessed to witness firsthand the transforming difference a defiant spirit of gratitude can and does make in people’s lives. One member I will never forget is a woman by the name of Blanche Joyce. Blanche never had children and toward the end of her life, most of her friends had passed, so she had few visitors other than friends from church. She was always a delight to visit, because she consistently named the many things in her life for which she was grateful. Blanche lived independently as long as she could, but eventually she needed the care of a nursing home. When I first went to visit her in that home, I found her in a shared lower level room, at the end of a long corridor, which in all honesty struck me as rather depressing. I was feeling sad for Blanche and asked her how she was doing. She immediately told me how grateful she was for the food and for the staff that attended to her, both of which she experienced as blessing from God. Gratitude changes how we see our world. It defies and resists all those afflictions, troubles and systems of oppression that tell us we should give up, throw in the towel, and give into the enemy of despair.

As most of you know the rain garden we are dedicating today is made possible by a grant from Ramsey County covering 75% of the cost. Ramsey County had received funding so that churches and non-profits might install rain gardens on their property. It is their hope and expectation that by putting rain gardens up on properties such as ours it will encourage other people to consider putting rain gardens up on their property. We are in other words, evangelists for rain gardens, giving witness to the cleansing potential these gardens offer.

It will, of course, be wonderful if we can serve that role as evangelist for rain gardens, but our primary role, the role we have been given as a community of faith is to plant, nurture and grow a spirit of defiant gratitude, giving evangelical witness to a spirit of hope, courage and strength for all the challenges we face. We don’t need to perfect, anymore then rain garden needs to be perfect in absorbing all the pollutants. There is room for expressions of frustration, sadness and tears, but if we take our cue from the Psalmist and from Paul, when people come through our church doors, what they will hear most often is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

**Psalm 138**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist reminds us that gratitude is vital for a life of faith. There is no expectation that life will always go as one hopes or we will live without troubles, but the Psalmist does affirm the everlasting love of God, by which we are sustained and for that love the Psalmist gives thanks.*

I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O God, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of God, for great is the glory of God. For though God is high, God regards the lowly; but the haughty, God perceives from far away. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. God will fulfill God's purpose for me; your steadfast love, O God, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

**2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

*As one who has spent days in jail and suffered abuse at the hands of Roman authorities, the Apostle Paul knows that the early Christian church has plenty of reason to feel discouraged and to lose hope. Yet, in spite of whatever difficulties they might face, the Apostle Paul encourages them to increase their thanksgiving and gratitude for all that God has done and is doing.*

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture — "I believed, and so I spoke" — we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.  
  
So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.