



# Thankfull

## Week 3

Brian Mattson - 11/24/2024

This is the week. Are you ready? The Christmas season is going to come crashing into us full force on Friday. People will scurry about shopping. Some will be eating leftovers and watching football. Others will be busy outfitting their homes with festive decorations. A transformation will take place almost overnight next weekend. The places in our lives will no longer be dressed in oranges, browns, and fall colors. Instead, buildings, streets, homes, and even cars will be bathed in the reds, greens, and whites of the holiday season. And it will happen quickly. In a few days time, we will be in a winter wonderland.

Of course, some places and people already turned the calendar to December way back in October, but for most of us, next weekend marks the change. And today, we will spend some time doing our own decorating, so that next Sunday, when people show up, this room will be transformed into a beautifully decorated sanctuary ready for the season. We are going to talk about transformations that happen much more slowly today. The hearts and minds of people take a lot longer to change than a few hours, a day, or a weekend.

But let's jump in the way back machine for a moment, shall we? Do you remember the kids' table when the family got together during the holidays? You know what I'm talking about. It was the table at Thanksgiving or other big family meals that was usually in another room. Oftentimes it was shorter, or maybe just a card table, with an assortment of seats or high chairs. Its tablescape was not nearly as ornate as the adult table. The cousins would all sit around it, giggling, trying not to get yelled at from the other room.

I have so many memories of Thanksgivings and Christmas celebrations, birthdays and anniversaries, where my cousins and I would be seated in our own section. Our drinks were all in mismatched plastic cups. The napkins were either paper towels or plain white squares, which we hardly ever used. We had to go to the other room to fill our plates. Spills were a regular occurrence. Putting things in each other's drinks happened often. We joked and poked fun at each other. And this was the scene, year after year.

The older we got, the conversations changed, but we were still at the kids table. The adults started trusting us with real glassware. Napkins were still seldomly used, but the spills were less frequent as well. And as we grew, the space we were seated in felt smaller and smaller. There was not enough room at the kids table for a couple teenagers, some upper elementary kids, and only one or two littles. Something had to give.

The first thing to go was my older brother. One Thanksgiving as the family was figuring out who would sit where, I was told that Curt was at the adult table this year. I was shocked, but it made sense. He was 14 or so. There was more space at the adult table, and my younger cousins were all getting bigger too. A few years later, I joined him. It felt like a

promotion. Except it was much more boring. I was told to keep my elbows off the table. I had to hold my fork the right way. But slowly and surely, I had been transforming into an adult, I suppose. It didn't happen overnight, even though it felt like it. It took about 15 years, and I'm pretty sure I had to win at Boggle to even get invited!

There are things in life that change very quickly: our moods, Ozarks weather, one's clothes. And there are things that change slowly: our beliefs and opinions, tread on tires, and people. People can change, but it usually happens very, very slowly.

So as we end this liturgical year today and begin fresh with Advent next Sunday, let's spend some time talking about how we can slowly change our hearts and minds. Maybe next year we will be newly transformed into grateful people, ready to welcome the season of Advent differently.

Perhaps you are already grateful today. Great! The transformation has begun, so let's keep that ball rolling. Like exercise, gratefulness is something that needs to be tended to regularly. Or maybe you are finding it difficult to be grateful right now, for a whole host of reasons. It happens. To all of us. Sometimes the bad in our lives overshadows the good, and it is *hard* to be thankful when the good gets overwhelmed. But, if we go too long without finding some sense of gratitude, it can make beginning again that much harder, painful even.

From October through December, we have some of the biggest events of the year. There are major holidays, elections, travel, and vacations. It feels like we rush from one thing to the next. And not only do we have the added stress of trying to fit all the things into our schedules, but the daylight hours are shorter and shorter. It's almost like the sun is laughing at us trying to check all the things off our list before it's dark at

5:30, which basically feels like midnight. And not only are the days shorter and the holidays bigger, but the stress and anxiety of trying to keep all the family togetherness cordial means our mental health can feel a bit frayed. I hope I'm not sending you into a big ball of anxiety right now. Am I?

That's not my goal, I promise. What I want to remind you is that there are still all of the normal, everyday things that are happening. We are waking up, going to work or school, eating, reading, cooking, and cleaning. Sometimes, it's those little things that go unnoticed, that keep us going, that we forget to be thankful for. Our gratitude should not be reserved for the big things only. Furthermore, our gratitude isn't meant to spring forth in any one moment, big or small. Rather, our gratitude comes as a response to God's grace.

The love of God, and the new Kingdom that is open to all people, doesn't come and go with the different days and months of our calendars. It isn't ushered in by the winds of the changing seasons or by the changing of our clocks. God's Kingdom is bursting forth amongst us, even through us, in our words and deeds. Enduring. Everlasting. Unshakeable.

**Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God.**

**-Hebrews 12:28 MSG**

When we read or hear the word *worship*, we already associate it with something we do weekly at church. Maybe from time to time in the car on a commute or in a quiet space at home, but our cultural understanding of that word is that it has a certain feel or act associated

with it. Singing. Prayer. Communion. Sermons. Those things we associate with church. But faith, spirituality, is not something to ponder only when we sit in these pews. It's an everyday, everywhere, every moment type of thing. We worship with our whole lives as a living sacrifice in response to God's grace that is all around us. Paul gives us these words.

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.**

**-Romans 12:1-5 NRSV**

Our worship is more than Sunday morning. Our true worship is the offering of our bodies and minds to Kingdom work. And by living each minute and moment clothed in kindness and the love of Christ, we are pursuing something foreign to our culture and modern world. We are being transformed into new creations each day, renewing our hearts and minds to discern the will of God. This world values power and control, whereas the Kingdom of God values service and empathy. And

by shifting our minds and our focus from ourselves to others, we are slowly freed from the confines of this world.

And notice again the words Paul uses in this passage. He says, "Present your bodies as a *living* sacrifice." Sacrifice has the obvious connotation of something that is put to death. The call on our lives, as a response to God's grace, is a *living* sacrifice. Our waking and sleeping. Our comings and goings. Our words and our thoughts. Our actions and our inaction. This life matters. Our aim is not death, rather an abundant life defined by our love. We are transformed, not by our outward appearance, but by our inward character. And from that transformed character springs forth words, actions, service, and compassion.

So if you find yourself asking, "This is great, but how do I go about transforming my heart and mind?" Being here is a good start. If we look back again to Paul's words, the last verse mentions that we are all of one body: Christ's body. We are all individual parts that make up the whole. And The Message translation uses these words: "Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around."

Our meaning and purposes in life are given definition when we go through life together, strengthened and guided with the help of others in this way of faith. We learn together. Sing together. Pray together. These are the ways our minds are renewed.

We serve together. We bear one another's burdens. We lift up the weak. Together. These are the ways our bodies are renewed.

Our understanding of Christianity is not formed in isolation, but in participation with the greater Body of Christ. Our differences and diversity, both in gifts and cultures, are strengths, not weaknesses. That's one of the beautiful things about how the United Methodist

Church does communion. It's a wonderful representation of the body of Christ, open to all, regardless of age, backgrounds, station of life, or even if you are brand new to faith. We go through life and are strengthened to continue the work Jesus started *together*. Communion is an active part of our faith. It is not simply a set of words we read, but an action that unites us with the work of Christ.

**Holy Communion is remembrance, commemoration, and memorial, but this remembrance is much more than simply intellectual recalling. This dynamic action becomes re-presentation of past gracious acts of God in the present, so powerfully as to make them truly present now. Christ is risen and is alive here and now, not just remembered for what was done in the past. Holy Communion is a type of sacrifice. It is a re-presentation, not a repetition, of the sacrifice of Christ.**

**-This Holy Mystery**

Part of this tradition is us coming forward to present our lives, our thoughts and actions, as a living sacrifice in union with Christ to be used by God for the works of redemption, reconciliation, and justice. And part of our liturgy as United Methodists, in the passage known as the Great Thanksgiving, reads like this: "We offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us . . ."

On Thursday, we celebrate Thanksgiving. A day, maybe just a moment, to reflect on everything you are thankful for. But don't let that moment of gratitude become just that; a moment. Because bursting forth from gratitude is happiness, love, service, kindness, and generosity. From a heart of gratitude comes a life of worship. And not just the kind of worship we think of on Sunday mornings. The etymology of the word

*worship* is a winding road that eventually came to be associated with religion. But way back before that, worship simply meant to devote one's entire life. Everything.

Theologian Willaim Barclay offers these words:

**True worship is the offering to God of one's body, and all that one does every day with it. Real worship is not the offering to God of a liturgy, however noble, and a ritual, however magnificent. Real worship is the offering of everyday life to God, not something transacted in a church, but something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God.**

You have a lot to be thankful for, I guarantee it. But the world has a long history of stealing our thanks. Distractions abound. Maybe it's hard to see how you can be a living sacrifice, doing the Kingdom work around you. Maybe you feel like you have nothing to give right now. The stress of the world and what may be to come are freaking you out a little bit. I get it. That's okay. Sometimes we need to just focus on the little things. Your breath. A roof. An apple.

Perhaps you could write down some of those little things you are thankful for. Send a text to a friend to say hello. Mail a card, or compose an email. Occasionally, I use an app called Lectio365 to spend 10 minutes in guided meditation. Just 10 minutes. And these little things add up.

Slowly and surely, your gratitude will grow. You will be transformed. Your life—every part of it—will be doing Kingdom work. Your focus will not be on peripheral things. You will begin to see the world as God sees. Your attention will be drawn to the things God is attending to. You will become equipped and empowered to get to God's work. It's not



that doing this work puts diamonds in your crown. This life of worship is a direct response of being thankful for God's grace that abounds. Here is Romans 12:1-5 again, but from The Message.

**So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.**