

November 18, 2018 – A Sunday of Giving Thanks
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Joel 2:21-27; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Matthew 6:25-33

Count Your Blessings

Jewish religious tradition encourages adults to say one hundred blessings a day, one hundred “thank you prayers.” Ritually observant Jews don’t waste any time; the moment after waking there’s a morning blessing they can say that goes, “I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me.” Isn’t that a beautiful way to begin the day? To emerge from sleep and say, “Thank you, God, for returning my soul to me.”

A next suggested blessing is also beautiful—in a different way. You say this thank you after going to the bathroom. It goes, “Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, King of the universe, who formed man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollow spaces. It is obvious and known before Your Seat of Honor that if even one of them would be opened, or if even one of them would be sealed, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You even for one hour. Blessed are You, Adonai, who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.” Or to put it another way, “Thank you God, for the body’s plumbing.”

There are many more suggested thank yous: blessings to say before meals, blessings after meals, blessings before bed, blessings that are built into the structure of daily life, numerous thank yous one can say about various things, at different times, at every possible opportunity, which is the intention of course, to be always thankful, always seeing things for which one can be thankful. So it is that saying these blessings can open up one’s eyes, to one’s surroundings, and one’s functioning. Saying these blessings can guide one not just to give thanks, but to have an attitude of gratitude, to have one’s soul attuned to God, the giver of all.

These are ancient blessings, ancient prayers, but the practice of giving thanks, intentionally and regularly, is also endorsed by modern psychology, particularly a branch known as positive psychology. You may have also seen or heard about studies in which, for example, people keep a gratitude journal. Once a day, or once a week, study participants are told to write down five things for which they’re thankful. Then, after some time of doing this, researchers compare the participants’ state before and after the practice of recording blessings. It turns out that doing so makes a significant impact on a person’s stress levels, sense of well-being, interpersonal relationships, mental and even physical health.

When I read about such research I think: that’s another great reason to go to church. Going to church is a regular and intentional way to give thanks. There’s even a section of the worship service called The Great Thanksgiving. (And, in church, you can get up and go to the bathroom whenever, especially now that you know there’s a prayer for that, too.) The whole order of worship, the “liturgy,” is structured to attune our souls to God, to adjust our attitudes, to guide us to recognize God, the giver of all. The prayers and songs and readings help open our eyes to what God is doing, all around us, and be thankful for it. “Look at the birds of the air ... as Jesus says in today’s gospel, very much in Jewish wisdom tradition, “Look at the birds of the air...your heavenly Father feeds them...Consider the lilies...”

We consider the lilies, every week, in our prayers of intercession. In that block of prayers that comes after the sermon hymn there’s always a petition about the earth and its creatures, how we are thankful for them, and are called to care for them. (That’s also the Sunday School theme this year, caring for creation, as well as a theme of the Christmas play, the children

can tell you that rehearsals are well underway.) Also in the prayers there's always a petition for people who are sick or suffering, people listed on the back of our bulletin—so many people who are going through tough times. One of the ways we care for them is by praying for them. Another way is by sending them cards, or calling them, or visiting them. Yet another way is being introduced today, with our new parish nurse, Vivian Shin, who has volunteered to be a resource for people with health concerns. We pray for her today, and for those she serves, for all who suffer in any way. We pray for them, not to give God a laundry list of our aches and pains, we pray to give God thanks for that person, who is especially on our mind because of the tough things they are experiencing. We pray to give God thanks for whatever healing they may experience, and we pray to give ourselves a reminder that we are God's presence with those who suffer.

This week we have yet another petition in the intercessory prayers, a special petition added just for this Sunday, a petition designed to help us give thanks. You heard a little bit about this in the Children's sermon, here's how it will go. The assisting minister will give us a prompt, and then we'll all name things for which we are thankful. All of us speaking out loud, spontaneously, at the same time. It should be a block of sound. Earlier this fall I hosted a worship service here for a meeting of pastors, and we tried this—and it flopped, miserably. I gave the thankfulness prompt, and all you could hear was crickets. I am confident we can be more grateful than that gathering of ministers. The children already gave us some suggestions. You can come up with at least a couple more. If we all name just two things we'll say well over a hundred blessings. All you have to do is say "Thank you for ..." and then name something.

You might say, "Thank you God, for restoring my soul to me." "Thank you God, for the body's plumbing. Thank you, God, for indoor plumbing. Thank you, for the place in which I sleep. Thank you for the person sleeping next to me. Thank you for hot water. Thank you for coffee. Thank you for the soft gray of the winter sky. Thank you trees, and their branches' dark filigrees. Thank you for the beauty of the earth. Thank you for the people I see on my way to church. Thank you for a place to know and worship you. Thank you for Christ, who reveals your infinite generosity. Thank you for reconciliation. Thank you for the Spirit, which opens me up to what you have given. Thank you, God. Thank you.