



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

October 15, 2017

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:4-9

A Habit of Gratitude

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In our lives and our world, we find both tragedy and beauty, illness and profound goodness, uncertainty and possibility. Some people in horrible circumstances radiate hope, courage, generosity. Some people with much success and resources spiral into frustration, depression. At some point, we all face it all. We all feel it all. What makes the difference between descending into anxiety and fear or rising to live with joy and peace? That difference pulses at the very heart of our faith. That decisive turn is, for me, one of defining insights of the Reformation.

In Europe 500 years ago people like you and me chatted at home, or around town, and came to sanctuaries like ours, longing for good news. Questions filled their minds. Emotions filled the heart. And often what they heard from church fed off their fear and bread even more, maybe something like the image we read from the Exodus—an angry judgmental God, ready to kill. To be honest, that image persists for some people even still today. And ... we proclaim a meaningful, faithful alternative.

Sermons this month explore insights and priorities from the Reformation which still guide our Presbyterian faith today. Last week we talked about how we bring the order of Holy Love in our everyday lives. How we shape community and community shapes us as we persist through normal routines and loving relations toward the prize of that heavenly vision and call God gives us in Christ Jesus. He wrote an email response, gifts I'm often blessed to receive on Sunday evening. I love it! I'm sincerely grateful for the time, effort, emotion anyone invests to

continue the conversation, as I see that sermons are at best. We won't always agree—which is good and important as we keep growing together. More on that next week!

First, in his message, I heard an echo of the Spirit speaking this week. While freedom is a blessing, he observed, fear of failure in our choices, accentuated by stressed need to achieve drives “winning in competition with others, good grades and entrance to reputable schools, so we can earn lots of money and accumulation of power over others, the right to expect others to do and believe what we say.”

Friends, our efforts and choices often reap positive reward. That's good. Trouble is, taken too far, we can think having a good life is all up to us, alone. It can slip into a kind of “works righteousness”, even in a secular sense. One great phrase that arose from Martin Luther, John Calvin and others is that we're “saved by grace through faith.” Sometimes it's shortened to “saved by faith alone.” What do we mean by faith? From my own questions, and listening to friends like you, sometimes it's hard to know. What does it really look like in our everyday lives—to be “saved by grace through faith”?

That's what Paul tries to help the Philippians learn and live. They faced challenges much like we do. It seems two women who lead the church there had a major conflict. It's a comfort, at least, to know we're not the first! We don't know details of what exactly keeps them from rejoicing in peace. Still listen to Paul again: Do not worry about anything, but pursue everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. That move from worry to thanksgiving through prayer makes the difference. It is the decisive turn of living faith.

Now, I trust we all know something about worry and anxiety. Shall we pause a moment and air it all out. What is there to worry about? Lord, have mercy. What

about why we just don't feel good. Or that lump we noticed. How we can find or keep a job. How we're going to pay all the bills. Lord, have mercy. What about why my child is sick. Or what my teenager might do behind the wheel. What about our travel plans and terrorists, or my daughter studying overseas. Lord, have mercy. What about conflict among family members. Or will she try to do it again. What about body image, bullying, endless variation on what someone thinks of me. Lord, have mercy. What about climate change, culture change, our political climate, and the place of church in society. Fires in California and floods in Kalamazoo, hurricanes, Zika, or North Korea. Lord, have mercy. Have we covered it all, yet?!

Anxiety and uncertainty compelled Hebrews to make a golden calf. As the story goes, Moses stayed on the mountain with God longer than expected. You see, people's reaction starts with their expectations. No texting. No Skype. A bit of smoke seen from down below—who knows what that signals. Human imagination can run wild, can't it? Lots of potential horrible scenarios. Amen? Uncertainty turns to fear. If it happened to him, what about us? People want something clear to make them feel secure. They encircle Aaron—is it with appeal or threat? Do something! Pressure and insecurity likely grips him, too. Alright, give me your gold, he says. They sacrifice resources. He concocts a celebration. I wonder if it was a conscious calculation. He thought that's what they love—what they've given their heart to, what's valuable to them. That's where they put their trust.

James Smith just might see it that way. The heart is like a compass, he explains. It orients where we're go in life. Which direction we choose in any place and time. And if that's true, it needs regular calibration, attuned to our Creator, our magnetic north. "Our ultimate loves, longings, desires, and cravings are *learned*," Smith stresses. "We learn to love ... through practices that form *how* we love." Whatever we give our heart to through habits, practices, and rituals—that's what we worship. That shapes who we become. Now there are many rival rituals in our world. Many

golden calves try to claim our love. One prime example in American culture, Smith says, is the shopping mall. He outlines the consumer gospel and how it gets conveyed in architecture and rituals of malls compared with worship spaces like these.ⁱ We sacrifice resources, for the promise of celebration, satisfaction.

What I'm really concerned about is how it all shapes perceptions and expectations. Especially when our Moses, our God connection, seems absent and anxiety rises. Now there are basic necessities rightfully expected for all people. Beyond that we can be as greedy or generous, in spirit, with \$20 in our pocket as with \$20 million in the bank. The only way anyone who shares material prosperity and security of our culture can feel at all unsatisfied is rooted in perceptions and expectations. Perception of what is a good life. Expectation about my place and how things should go and a desire for control. If consuming things and achievements define a good life, can we ever have enough? Enough clothes, stuff in our homes, money, accolades, promotions—golden calves. Always need something more, better, maybe like a neighbor next door or in the ad.

You see, a constant focus on what we haven't yet acquired or accomplished, this habituated perception of reality that we cultivate ... it paradoxically drives our anxiety, fear, dissatisfaction, depression. Expectations are powerful. We need something to motivate us. But when they twist reality and distort possibility they can destroy us. One of the great insights I come back to time and again is that the difference between expectations and reality equals the amount of anxiety, worry, grief, frustration, anger, conflict, depression—all that compounding negativity we know.

Sometimes church theology has exploited people, proliferating those emotions not liberating our hearts. We're not good enough, God won't love us, we won't be saved, unless we say the right words, live the right way, pay a certain amount of

money, mentally assent to the right ideas. It's little surprise that a judgmental image of God seems much like how we view ourselves sometimes.

Do you see where we're going with this all yet? Friends, life will always be a combination of good days and bad days, tragedy and beauty, illness and blessing, uncertainty and possibility. The question is what do we see? What do we accentuate? Where, by habit, do we center our heart?

Do we get the parallel, or really contrast, in our texts for today? The celebration of a golden calf and Paul urging the Philippians to rejoice always! Whatever surface similarity, deep down they're opposing orientations of the heart. Hebrews on the Exodus try to twist reality and literally fabricate a new one as surface celebration and security. Paul confronts reality as it is. But he doesn't end with disheartening difficulties. He trusts in resurrection—that is, God's power to bring life where it seems limited or even non-existent at the moment.

When Paul writes this letter, he's in prison, on charges that could lead to execution. He's writing to people who are persecuted and having a pretty rough go in life. And he says rejoice always? You see, Paul speaks to their perspective and expectations. Do not worry, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving give your life to God. The Lord is always near, he says. Try to relate with God in everything. Open our hearts with thanksgiving, with gratitude, naming how we know God's presence near us. How Sacred Grace is the source of all life. How Holy Love touches us over and over. How Eternal purposes of peace get made real in everyday ways. In everything ... with thanksgiving, Paul urges. Not with a need to please or to appease to be good enough for God's love. Saved by grace means that we trust the Divine Order and intention of Steadfast Love in everything from the start dust to our DNA and all the life and relationships created in between. Saved by grace through faith is all about how we respond.

You see, friends, I believe gratitude is the beginning of faithfulness. Through gratitude we recognize gifts of love and life around us all the time. Through gratitude we are moved to respond with that very Spirit of love in us, serving so others may live. Gratitude leads to and combines with many other virtues—humility, compassion, awe, reverence, generosity. Gratitude is more than momentary emotion. More than one holiday per year. It's our posture in the world. It's practice for how we live. It's a habit we must cultivate for it to really guide us powerfully. "Life is gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage," affirms our Confession of 1967.

Now friends, we know it's not always easy. We don't minimize struggles and suffering in our lives and all we hear about in our world. We don't try to be some Pollyanna and simply wish it all away. No, remember again, Paul wrote from prison not a palace, to people persecuted not being celebrated. This hardship we hear about and face is real. I had a video conference call last Tuesday with our CREDO team preparing to lead our next retreat week with Presbyterian ministers. One team member lives in California not far from Napa. One is from Puerto Rico with many friends and family still there. One was a chaplain in Blacksburg when the Virginia Tech shootings happened years ago. I wonder what she feels with every mass shooting in the news. Yes, this darkness and sin and tragedy is real. And that is precisely why we emphasize that in God's grace it's not the end of the story.

We believe: after the cross comes the dawn of Easter and resurrection made real in our lives. That's what we proclaim each week in our worship. Because we receive God's grace we recognize what's not right. Lord, have mercy! Yet we rejoice in the promise that nothing in life or in death will separate us from the God's loving power and purposes in our Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing. Gratitude for this never-

ending grace, then is the holy pivot of our faith. Gratitude is our habit as we strive to serve Christ in daily tasks of a holy and joyful life.

I hear gratitude in his email to me last Sunday when he shared: amid the fear, insecurity, and authoritarianism in youth, music saved me ... now it's my "better angels" (compassion), and the ability to help family, write, or do a little science. I saw gratitude shine in her tearful eyes; I felt her spirit rise that day, as she shared her life-altering epiphany ... that after all the hell, the fear, the stress they faced, the simple fact is that her beloved is still here with her.

Finally, beloved, Paul urges, keep on thinking about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, commendable, pleasing, any excellence we see, anything worthy of praise. Coupled with our Exodus text it reminded me of Psalm 136, which echoes in our opening call to worship each week: God's steadfast love endures forever. With grateful celebration, the Psalm recounts events of the Exodus with that refrain after every phrase. As a habit of gratitude, I tried it this week.

Before the rain began yesterday, we were surrounded with the fullness of autumn glory in Michigan, the beauty of the earth, for God's steadfast love endures forever. And sometime today the rain will stop and flooded streets will begin to recede and the Broncos may even get to play football, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

At the Northside Ministerial Alliance breakfast, we gathered among community leaders, police officers, people making grace real in so many ways, grateful for grits and eggs and turkey sausage and the commitment of our community, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

Over lunch the next day we talked about a broken heart and imperfect job, yet with gratitude goodness in family and friends and resources to pay the bills the persist, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

I heard news of positive employment figures, grateful for every person who makes a statistic real in their choices and efforts, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

On Friday, we had a new sign installed. And though, surely, it's controversial and not everyone agrees, many perspectives were considered through a long, careful, and patient process for God's steadfast love endures forever.

Today Elizabeth will lead musical companions in Spooktacular Sounds, inspired by the same Spirit that moved her to play 59 chimes after the postlude last week, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

How do your hearts fill today, how are we all called to witness to the promise that God's steadfast love endures forever? In our lives and our world, dear friends, we find both tragedy and beauty, illness and profound goodness, uncertainty and possibility. At some point, we all face it all. We all feel it all. More than frustration and depression may we rise to the goodness in life and respond with or with hope, courage, generosity. Here's my earnest prayer for us all this week, this day, for every day. Living with a habit of gratitude in everything, may the peace of God which passes understanding strengthen our hearts. Our God of grace, our God of glory, our God of peace will be with us always!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 20-21, 39-55.