

“And Be Thankful”

Psalm 95:1-7a; Colossians 3:12-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know ourselves your creatures and give thanks. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sometimes the words that are the most striking are the ones that are the most succinct. In this passage we just heard from Colossians, there are some long sentences: 13 words, 16 words, 20, 25, 27, 31... and then there's that sentence nestled right in the middle, just three words long: “And be thankful.” Its contrasting brevity gives it the centering power of a jewel in the middle of an ornate gold ring. Now clearly, we have biblical translators and their choices about capitalization and punctuation to thank for this gift, as much as Paul or whichever student of his wrote Colossians. But however it got there, there it is. Holiness, forgiveness, even love seemingly need lots of extra verbiage to be clearly taught. But gratitude? Nothing extra required. Simply, “and be thankful.”

And the truth is that we don't need anything else, do we? Thankfulness doesn't require explanation. We understand it from the inside out, if we pause long enough to pay it any mind at all. Ironically, Paul's shortest sentence reflects a truth that the psalms use a lot more words to make manifest. In Psalm 95, the one we read today, and in countless other psalms, we see, over and over, that thanksgiving is paired with reflection on the beauty of creation. What's more, many of the psalms use metaphors

implying that the beauty of creation itself is an expression of thanksgiving. In just the next one, Psalm 96, verses 11 and 12, we can read “let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.” Psalm 98, verse 8: “Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.” It’s as if the natural state of all created things is to give thanks, preferably with a joyful noise.

So when Paul tells us, or the Colossians, to “be thankful,” perhaps there isn’t much explanation needed because it’s simply an invitation to return to our natural state. He does get at the “joyful noise” part later, with the exhortation to “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” But did we even need that reminder? “My life flows on, in endless song, above earth’s lamentation. I hear the clear, though far off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I’m clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

And it doesn’t even matter if singing is your joyful noise of choice or not. That isn’t the point. The point is that being part of God’s creation means that gratitude is fundamental to our existence; thankfulness is our natural state, whether it makes us sing or laugh or create or care for others. So why is it that we struggle sometimes to let gratitude guide our living? How is it that we are pulled out of that natural state of thankfulness and forget to praise God with whatever we do, in word or deed? What are the barriers to gratitude and how can we avoid them?

I would suggest that there are two major emotional states that block gratitude, and both of them emerge when we forget that we are God's creatures, beloved children, formed and held by the hands of the Everlasting. The first is pride. If we start to live as though we believe we are self-made creations, refusing to acknowledge the shoulders on which we stand, the lucky breaks we gotten, the invisible privileges we've enjoyed – and most importantly, refusing to admit our dependence on the grace of God – our gratitude muscles atrophy and die. If we insist that everything we have is something we earned, and feel disdain for those who have less because they must not have been as deserving as we are, we will cut ourselves off from our natural state as creatures of God and any chance of experiencing the blessings of gratitude. When we expend the capacity of our lungs on puffing ourselves up, we don't have any breath left for making a joyful noise.

To acknowledge ourselves creatures of God, alongside the rest of God's glorious creation, is to immediately assume a posture of humility and thankfulness. To recognize the source of our life, our breath, our sustenance, and our heart's capacity to go on in life, is to know ourselves deeply dependent and give thanks for the unfailing love and grace of God that sustain us in each moment. The pretense of self-sufficiency is a fool's game, doomed to leave us in a hollow of loneliness. So why is it that asking for help is such a difficult lesson, such a source of shame? Why do we cling to our independence like a life-raft, when really it's the thing dragging us down? Practicing thankfulness can help us release these delusions and return to our Creator.

The other emotional barrier to gratitude comes from the other direction; it's all the challenges that are rooted in fear. Stress, worry, feelings of insecurity, all of the voices in our heads that tell us we are not enough and we will never have enough – these lies cannot stand when we claim our identity as beloved creatures of God. First of all, if God made us, we cannot be unworthy. We cannot be unlovable, because we were created by the love of God. We cannot be not enough or too much, because we are creations of the God of abundance. We cannot be irrelevant or unheard, no matter our age or status, because God is hanging on our every word and deed, waiting to see what we'll do next.

Secondly, if we can know ourselves to be God's beloved creatures, then we can begin to trust that God will take care of us. We can let go of our need to grasp and hoard, and give thanks for the gracious plenty we already have. We can speak up for our need and others' need for just compensation and adequate care, without shame or fear, knowing that we are just as deserving of fullness of life as any of God's creatures. We can open our hands wide in sharing, without judging the worthiness of any who might be in need, because we recognize our unity as fellow creatures of God.

The encroaching barriers of pride and fear are constant threats to our natural state of thankfulness. This is why so many people have taken gratitude on as a spiritual practice. Grounding ourselves in thankfulness, intentionally acknowledging our existence as beloved creatures of God, helps liberate us from the teetering tower of pride or the shadowy cages of fear. Be thankful, Paul says, and all the other words

start to fall into place. “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ... Forgive each other. ... Clothe yourselves with love. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” But also, “Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!”

It may not feel all that humble to compare ourselves to a mountain range, as we give praise to God in song. And it may not feel all that meek to know that we are colleagues with the mighty ocean when we whisper “Hallelujah!” But just as nature has myriad ways to praise the glory of God, so our lives offer us countless opportunities to make joyful noise and express the gratitude that is the bedrock of our souls. We gather here each week to help one another throw off the shackles of pride and fear, so we can return to our natural state of thankfulness. We gather here and name one another beloved creatures of God. We gather here and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God, with gratitude in our hearts. I am grateful for you, and I give thanks to God that we are here together. Hallelujah and Amen!