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The Church at the Heart of the City

"God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hands, we are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen."

Growing up, I remember saying this table grace with my family at (almost) every midday meal. In fact, there was a grace for breakfast, a grace for lunch, and a grace for supper. My brothers and I were quick to remind our parents of this if they ever tried to say the "wrong" one. Our favorite, though, was probably the grace we used whenever we got together with our extended family for the holidays. That's when we would pull out the "Johnny Appleseed" grace and all sing it together.

Table graces are nothing new. People have been giving thanks to God before meals for a long, long time. Jesus gave thanks to God before breaking the bread and sharing it with his disciples when he instituted the first Holy Communion. Jews gave thanks to God as part of the ritual involved with sharing the Passover meal. This idea of expressing gratitude for what we have received by saying "thank you" is deeply engrained in our culture.

As we prepare to enter into this season of Thanksgiving, however, it is worth taking a closer look at *why* and *how* we relate to gratitude. Is it just about saying "thank you" when someone gives us something or is there more to it than that?

This would certainly seem to be the case when it came to the apostle Paul and his understanding of gratitude. His first letter to the churches in Thessalonica, believed to be the oldest of the New Testament scriptures, opened with a clear expression of thanksgiving. *"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Thessalonians 1:2). Paul's words set the standard for the deep, consistent, and persistent expression of gratitude found throughout not only this letter, but all of his writings. Gratitude, for Paul, was not a one-time act of saying "thank you". Rather, it was a way of living and being in every moment of every day.

Diana Butler Bass, author and scholar of Christian history, picked up on this in her own studies and has spoken often about this need for a deeper understanding around gratitude. Paul is one of several examples she points to for what it might look like to actually embody gratitude with our whole being.

When we see gratitude as transactional (i.e. saying "thank you" because we've been given something), we end up trapping ourselves and others in this cycle of debt. Is it enough to say "thank you"? Do I need to do more to show my gratitude? If I do more for them, will they say "thank you" or will they return the favor, putting me back in their debt again?

Instead of twisting ourselves into knots trying to sort out who owes whom, the example of Paul shows us that "relationship is the most important part of gratitude". It is this ongoing relationship, with God and with one another, that serves as the grounding for our life together. We are no longer obligated to give thanks just because we owe something for our debt. Rather, our gratitude becomes this cycle of gifts and responses, over and over again.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Our challenge as we move into the future together is to always reach for this deeper understanding, this consistent (and persistent) expression of our gratitude. We do this whenever we ask questions, wrestle with our doubts, and learn from one another. We do this when we use our gifts – music, art, writing, speaking – to praise God and to share the good news. We do this when we embody the love of Christ with and for one another without expectation of favor or reward. Gratitude is so much more than just saying “thank you”, but perhaps a simple table grace could be your first step...

Blessings,
Pastor Doug