

My Song of Grateful Praise
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs
Salem United Church of Christ
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How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 1 Thess. 3:9

Well, we have come to that day. This is our last Sunday together in our relationship as pastor and parishioner. This is now the third and last sermon in my three-part sermon series themed around my departure from Salem.

Two weeks ago, the sermon topic was “My Hope for Salem’s Future.” Under that title I charged you as a congregation to remember your history of doing big and bold things, to be at peace with one another, to have realistic expectations, and to seek the kingdom of God by focusing on Jesus.

Last week, under the title “How to Welcome Your New Pastor,” I charged you to trust the process our denomination has in place for selecting a new minister, to treat the new pastor as the individual God has called that person to be and is working upon them to become, to open your hearts and your lives to the new worker, and to be sensitive to the fact that the new pastor will likely tire of hearing my name.

The subject for today is “My Song of Grateful Praise.” As for the singing part, well, that is a metaphor. You will be happy to learn I am not going to do a solo. But I will work to hit the right notes in the only way I know how – by preaching. What follows is less a sermon than it is a personal testimony. My song of grateful praise has four verses, and all are full of gratitude.

The first verse of my song sings that I am grateful there is a message to preach.

Back in the days of the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament, a king sent a question to the prophet. The question was, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:17) In the New Testament, a turning point comes in the Gospel According to John when some Greeks approach the disciples and ask to see Jesus (Jn. 12:21). From that Old Testament day through to that New Testament day and right up to our own day, the same longing has been in the hearts of people who come to worship. “Is there any word from the Lord?” “We would see Jesus.” Sunday after Sunday people take their place in the pew and look to the pulpit longing to be fed with some gospel word that will bring them hope, courage, strength, and insight into life.

The pulpit itself is a hungry place. If it is going to have something to feed the people it must be fed with study, thinking, writing, planning, and prayer. Thankfully, God gives daily bread. Young preachers wonder if there will ever be enough sermons to fill all the Sundays on the waiting calendar. Experienced preachers discover that the real problem is how to find enough Sundays for all the sermons that call out to be preached. God gives daily bread to the preacher called to feed the flock.

This is especially true if one keeps close to scripture. Back in the mid-1980s when I was working on my doctorate I read this line of advice from a Congregationalist minister in London, Joseph Parker. He said,

You may depend on one thing, the only ministry that will last, and be as fresh at the end as it was at the beginning, is a biblical and expository one.¹

I copied that line into my notebook and wrote it on my heart as well. I have tried to give my best time and energy to the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and those old texts have become for me a present help in time of need. They have been to me just as the psalmist said, “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105).

The message that has emerged for preaching is not the latest trend of the day, not an echo of the pundits and television commentators, and not the repetition of yesterday’s doctrines in yesterday’s language. Rather it has been a living witness to the living God disclosing something the world cannot discern on its own.² And it has landed in our lives with comfort, guidance, challenge, and hope.

This message born of scripture and meant for the frontiers of contemporary living is the church’s place in society, and nothing can defeat it as long as the church keeps close to the good news of what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ. The church that keeps to this message, ever re-thinking it and ever re-applying it, will always have a hearing, for it will be able to speak to the times from the vantage point not of the shallow trend or the rutted tradition but from the living and present timeless and eternal.

I am grateful for that message there is to preach.

The second verse of my song sings that I am grateful for a people who gather.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his little book *Life Together*, taught that we should never take the Christian fellowship for granted. He spoke of it as a miracle. He said,

It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament.³

One thing we have enjoyed over these thirty years is this God-given miracle of gathering.

You have gathered for worship. Attendance has never been steadily great, I suppose, but it has never been steadily bad. By and large attendance has been consistently good. You have been here in the festive seasons and in the ordinary times. You have worshiped your way through the deepest of times like in 2001 when the Twin Towers fell, in 2008 when the stock market fell, and when members of our flock fell upon the sleep of death. When the pandemic first started to lift and we could gather once more for worship in person, you echoed that old psalmist who said, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” (Ps. 122:1) And I add parenthetically a sentence that is not a bit kind or ecumenically proper, but I will say it anyway: I could always count on you to be the ones swelling the crowd at the various ecumenical worship services. You have consistently gathered for worship.

¹ John Harries, *G. Campbell Morgan* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1930), p. 65.

² Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931), p. 125.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 18.

You have gathered for learning. Through Monday night Searchlight classes, Friday noon BLTs,⁴ and Sunday morning sessions, you have gathered to learn about Bible books, Bible people, contemporary issues, Christian themes, our denomination, and some of the religions outside Christianity.

You have gathered in fellowship for mutual care and companionship, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, praying for those in need of prayer, and helping those whose way was suddenly made steep by life. You have cared for one another in fellowship groups, impromptu gatherings, and in individual conversations. I would be remiss if I did not mention how you cared for me around the time of the death of my brother, the death of my mother, and my emergency heart surgery. I tell you: that banner fully covering our garage door, welcoming be back home with love, when Sherrol brought me home from the hospital was healing and strengthening in itself.

I am grateful for a people who gather for worship, study, and caring fellowship.

The third verse of my song sings that I am grateful for a people who scatter.

By that I mean I am grateful for a people who serve, giving of themselves in some way in some mission of some kind. Worship is wonderful and paramount, but worship that does not move into mission is empty and flawed. The only kind of worship that gets it right is worship that flows into mission.

Much of your missionary efforts have taken place through your faithful giving. Even when our current expense budget was stressed your mission giving remained strong. I was as proud as proud could be when the 2019 national gathering of the United Church of Christ, our General Synod, meeting in Milwaukee, announced on the floor that Salem was then one of the top 10 congregations in our denomination – not just in Wisconsin, but in our denomination – in terms of mission giving as a “5 for 5” congregation, referencing your support for the five general offerings in the United Church of Christ: OCWM, One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund.

Much of your missionary efforts have also taken place through active, hands-on doing. Once in a while we have all been involved in a mission project together, but more of the time you have embodied Elton Trueblood’s belief that the church is its most active when it is empty, meaning when its people are out in the world serving in some capacity consistent with their gifts and interests.⁵ You have gone missionally outside these doors and have been in the schools, in the food pantry, at your sewing machine, behind your wheel giving someone a ride, on a cot donating blood, in a nursing home serving cake, and on committees of the wider church. All the while, you haven’t been waiting for a medal or a ream of thank you notes. It has been for you the stuff of humble service, the right hand not knowing what the left was doing.

⁴ The letter stand for “Bag Lunch and a Text.”

⁵ Cf. a number of books in Trueblood’s body of work: *Alternative to Futility* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 99; *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 75; *The New Man for Our Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 86.

It is said of some congregations that they are so heavenly minded they do no earthly good. But you are heavenly minded in a way that inspires you to do earthly good, and I am grateful for a people who scatter.

The fourth verse of my song sings that I am grateful for a promise that continues.

The first three verses of my hymn look back. This one looks forward. We are speaking the last word over this pastorate today, but it is only the end of a chapter in our lives. The Lord who says, “I am doing a new thing” (Is. 43:19) has more in store for us both.

God has, I am sure, a promise for me, though what it is waits to be seen. Someone recently asked if I have any wood-working projects lined up; I am not a wood-worker and do not have any hobbies to speak of. Someone asked Sherrol if she has projects lined up for me; but she knows better than to ask me to fix anything. Anytime I try to repair something it usually means a bill from a real repairman to fix what I made worse. So I am awaiting further light on what I am to be doing in retirement. I am anticipating doing some writing projects and hunting for a publisher; I am also anticipating serving some congregation in an interim capacity, should that opportunity present itself. By and large I hope to continue the journey of discipleship without hiding my light under a bushel or burying my talent in the ground.

And God has, I am sure of it, a promise for you as a congregation. It is a promise that will take shape first under the interim leadership of Tom Robinson and then under the leadership of your next resident pastor. You, too, can be sitting on the edge of your seats awaiting further light. Just now your text of promise can be, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

I am grateful for the promise that awaits you and me.

Well there is my song of grateful praise. I am grateful for the message there is to preach, for a people who gather, for a people who scatter, and for a promise that continues.

Now, as I step away from this pulpit, I leave you with words Abraham Lincoln spoke to the people of Springfield, Illinois, on February 11, 1861, when he left them to take up work in Washington. In his farewell to the people of his beloved Springfield Lincoln said this:

Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well.⁶

⁶ Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 9.