

## **An Attitude of Gratitude**

The Rev. Renée Marie Rico  
Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ  
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Joel 2: 21-27, Matthew 6: 25-33

Author Anne Lamott says that there are really only three prayers in the world. The first is “helpme helpme helpme.” The second is “thankyou thankyou thankyou.” and the third is simply “Wow!’s

In a typical year, we gather at tables with friends, family, strangers invited into our midst, to celebrate this season we call “Thanksgiving.” The original thanksgiving that school children learn about the early days of pilgrims and Indians, the spring celebration that followed a very tough wintertime, in which the old and young alike succumbed to the harsh conditions in New England.

While the early 1621 thanksgiving of the pilgrims and native Americans dominates our understanding, in reality it wasn’t until the Civil War that Abraham Lincoln declared the holiday an annual holiday. The year was 1862, and a year in which the hopes and dreams of a quick “civil “war between the states” was now a faded memory, and the people of both the North and the South had settled into the realization that the conflict was going to take a long time, and the losses to families, communities, and the nation were mounting.

It was in such a time President Lincoln would write in his thanksgiving proclamation of the following year, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity . . .” While noting the perils and tragedy of the war, in the middle of tragedy, division, and loss, Lincoln also remembers that there is still much to be thankful for.

This is the lesson I receive from this example: Without the remembering part, it’s hard to be grateful. It’s in the remembering that we come to a different point of understanding where we are in our lives. It’s in remembering times like that that helps us get through times where such presence of God doesn’t seem so evident. It’s in remembering that we recall how God has acted in our lives in the past so we may continue to hope for the future.

This past year has been a tough one for our nation and much of the world. A world pandemic, protests in the streets, economic fallout, a divisive election. In addition to

that, some of us have experienced life-threatening illnesses, some have lost family members to divorce or death, or relocations. Our community has lost loved ones to death and moves. Some of us are worried about our finances, whether we have a lot or a little. We have on our lips the one of Anne Lamott's prayers: it's "helpme helpme helpme."

Surely God hears those prayers – and responds to them. But in addition to that, it is in these kinds of times that being thankful needs to be more than a platitude served up as a side dish to the turkey, but instead becomes our "main course" of the day.

### **Scripture Connection**

The two scripture readings today are taken from two different traditions. Matthew's text comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – a Moses-like set of teachings that sum up what his plan was for his day. The other scripture, from Joel, celebrates the majesty of God in nature.

The beauty of the two scriptures is quite close – Jesus connects the beauty of the world with the gratitude due to God for all the abundance in the world. We are worth more than the lilies of the field, and we can celebrate God's providence in our midst. Joel reminds the people who are eating in plenty that God is God and there is no other, as they are stewards of a rich landscape that provides for their needs.

### **Remembering**

Our connections to these scriptures is not hard to make, living in such a place where natural beauty is literally just outside the door. Even the trees can teach us about gratitude and memory.

When I lived in the Bay area, I loved to visit a small national park called Muir Woods, a place for coastal giant redwoods. In my trips there I always enjoyed the cool quiet of the redwood forests. And it was there that I learned about fairy rings. One day our volunteer docent reminded us during an ecological talk about how redwood trees grow. There are two ways that small trees grow – they either grow from seeds spilt out of the small cones of the trees, or they grow from the burls of the trees – bulges of seedling-like materials attached to the trunks.

When a redwood tree grows from a burl, it grows right next to the mother tree. Often, then, there are rings of trees that grow around the mother tree on all sides. Eventually, the mother tree will die and the remains decompose into the ground, a process that takes about 200 years! After the mother tree is gone, the remaining trees still form the ring, now with a hollow center. The empty center is the reminder of the life-giving tree

that came before that gave its life for the other trees that now stand. The fairy ring is the remembrance of things long past, a sign of the unbroken chain of the generations of the Redwoods.

I think this can be a way to see our lives when we hit hard times – it can feel, as it might for the young redwood trees, as though the center of our lives has been cut out. But the empty place and the empty space can be the place for something new to happen as well. At those times, we can look to the parts of our lives that are the ring that surround this center, the daughters of that center now gone. This can balance out our “helpme helpme helpme” with plenty of “Thank you thankyou thankyou.”

There are spaces left behind from those who have gone before, spaces that, like the mother Redwood trees, remind us that the old center has gone, that a new way of living is around the corner, ready to be engaged.

There’s another lesson to be found in those daughter Redwood trees. The redwood tree has very shallow roots – Redwood trees grow in groves because they need the strength of each other in order to keep standing when they come under stress. Those shallow roots stretch all across the ring and intertwine their roots together. While the center mother tree might be gone, without the ring, they’d all fall down. They become stronger for each other.

This time in our country feels a bit like the center is gone – we are in the middle of some pretty big changes in our culture, our economy, and our communities. At such a time, it’s helpful to remember both the time in which Abraham Lincoln instituted the official Thanksgiving, and the times in which the prophets and Jesus lived – which were also uncertain.

We can be just like those daughter Redwood trees – individually we might topple, but together, underground we connect and support each other to find the way into the future that will look different than the past did. Our roots of faith can intertwine and be stronger than even. We can then pray, Wow!

The apostle Paul puts it this way: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...1 Thessalonians 5:16

Let it be so.