

Hello everyone! Happy Wednesday! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, May 6! I'm so grateful that you are able to join me for this intentional time to focus on God, and just take this breather out of your day to remember our Creator and God's work in our world.

Today I'm going to do a deep dive on a topic I've mentioned in a couple of sermons and devotions lately and it seemed like this topic could use its own special time of focus. And that topic for today is gratitude. So let's take a moment to center ourselves in prayer as we meditate on gratitude:

*Good and gracious God, we come to you with hearts full of gratitude. Thank you for all the ways you show up and lead us in our lives. Lord, even though these times are trying, and we find ourselves in the throes of grief and darkness and anxiety and hurting hearts, we thank you for your constant presence. Your promises of new life, grace, and mercy are what carry us through all our moments of life. The hope in your Son Jesus Christ gives us strength for our journeys and we give you thanks for his life, death, and new life again. May your Holy Spirit empower us to see your work in all things, dear God. In your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

So last week when we talked about prayer, one of the three main types of prayer that I mentioned was "thank you". And though it's so necessary to call on God for help when we are struggling and praise when we see God's goodness in our world, gratitude is the type of prayer that we can lean on no matter what we are experiencing. Gratitude is a way of seeing the world as it truly is, not through rose-colored lenses or a false sense of positivity or disingenuous observations, but the truth that is around us. Because in each and every situation we find ourselves in, no matter how bleak, no matter how challenging, no matter how absolutely impossible it may seem for us to go on, we can absolutely always find something to be grateful for. And this ability to be grateful even in the darkest of times is one of the most powerful tools we have in our spiritual lives and beyond.

You can be grateful for the simple fact that you woke up and are breathing today. That breath of life is a gift from the Holy Spirit that makes us alive. You woke up today. You are alive today! My goodness it can be difficult just to keep ourselves alive these days and you are absolutely doing the thing of staying alive and we can thank God that we have the opportunity to live another day. And as much as I'm tempted to break into the BeeGees song when I talk about staying alive, I promise we're not going to do that today. Maybe later I'll sing to my cat. I would say that I'm grateful for the joy of 70s pop music right now. And I'm grateful for my cat.

But anyway, this is the power of gratitude, it's the power of being alive. No matter how dark or bleak or impossible a situation may be, there is always something, even what might seem like the most insignificant or tiny or overlooked thing, there is absolutely always something to be grateful for. We can be grateful that we have a consistent form of shelter and source of fresh water. We are grateful to have food to eat. We are grateful for this spring weather bringing forth new life from the earth. We are grateful for the ability to connect with one another, even if it's not in person and in ways that are new to us. We are grateful for the ability to learn new things. We

are grateful for the people we are in contact with. We are grateful we have something we can actually do to help combat this virus - stay at home, make masks, and wear masks. We are grateful for books to read, movies to watch, puzzles and games to play, and all the fun ways we get to spend our free time, especially with our loved ones. We are grateful for the God of all creation, all life and grace who loves us from the time we are knit in our mothers' wombs all the way through our time to pass on to the heavenly kingdom. And even then, not even death will separate us from God's unending love and that is a holy gift that we must give thanks for every single day.

The scriptures are filled with examples of gratitude from our spiritual forebears and the biblical authors. Most of the letters in the New Testament begin with gratitude for the people to whom the author is writing. A great example is the beginning of Romans, Paul's letter to the people of the church in Rome - this is chapter 1 verses 8 and 9: *"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers."*

So though gratitude might seem like the "hot" topic these days, lots of people are talking about gratitude, it truly is an ancient, spiritual, and powerful tradition and outlook for us to have. Our forebears were definitely onto something in writing about gratitude. Gratitude is a powerful perspective shifter - from the trying nature of living to the beauty and blessings that are all around us. Both of these things are real, the difficult seasons and moments and situations, and the fact that there are blessings abundant around us.

I brought up Paul because he wrote most of his letters that now make up our New Testament while he was imprisoned. Being in prison can seem pretty bleak - there are a lot of negative things going on (including Paul's eventual martyrdom) and it can be difficult to see what is possibly good about that situation. But how does Paul begin each of his letters? With gratitude. With gratitude and prayer for the churches who are continuing to spread the good news of Jesus Christ all over the ancient Greco-Roman world and beyond. Gratitude that the church still continues to grow and live and thrive in the midst of persecution. Gratitude for God, who gave us His only Son Jesus Christ so that we may have life abundant and life eternal. This gratitude is much-needed encouragement for the early church, and provides us with a framework and understanding of gratitude from our earliest Christian forebears. Gratitude provides a changing of the heart and spirit, to repent from negative wallowing and turn towards the goodness of God very present in our world.

It is important to name the reality of the difficulties, and we should never be ashamed of naming what is real and what our emotions are in any time or place. Gratitude is the tangible skill of bringing ourselves out of the pit, by naming the full reality of challenges and blessings, through the grace and love of God, who empowers us in all things.

Here is some scripture to help center our focus on gratitude (this is Colossians 3:15-17): *“...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

If we trust in that God is always with us, we trust in the promises that God will never abandon or forsake us, then we truly always have something to be grateful for. When we proclaim that death will never have the final word, that the valley of the shadow of death is certainly not the end of our story, we make a bold statement of life and new life, and we give thanks for God's mercy and the house of the Lord in which we will dwell for our entire lives.

So this week for our spiritual practice, I have two suggestions for you - both of which are powerful ways to center ourselves on gratitude. The first is to keep a daily gratitude journal. This can be any sort of writing down what you are grateful for on a daily basis. Mine is usually a weird mash-up of bullet points and long stream of consciousness-style ranting, which is often how my brain works, so whatever feels genuine to you, figure out a way to create a daily practice of gratitude. It can even be a note on your phone, as you think of something that you are grateful for, type it up! Write it down! Even if you don't love writing things down or keeping a journal, maybe for this next week, make a point to share with your spouse, partner, family member, trusted friend, or brother or sister in Christ in our church family - share with that beloved person what you are grateful for once a day. It will be fascinating to see how your gratitude both overlaps and helps you to see certain things in a new light. And by documenting your gratitude, you then have a tangible log of what you're grateful for, your blessings, to look back upon when things do seem difficult or bleak or dark - and these things are genuine to you and your life. Naming your gratitude makes it that much more real.

And in that idea of sharing your gratitude with someone you love and/or trust, my second suggestion of a practice is to actually express gratitude to someone (or many people!) you encounter this week. Make a point to say thank you to the person who rings up your groceries. Thank your mail delivery person for all they're doing to keep our lives afloat. Write a card to someone you haven't spoken to in a while and thank them for your friendship. Whoever you choose to share your gratitude with, the important thing is actually to verbalize your gratitude and share it. It is in the sharing of our gratitude that we truly make an impact on others' lives, by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. This practice of sharing our gratitude is a great way to love and serve our neighbors right now - expressing gratitude to lift their spirits as much as it lifts ours when someone says “thank you”.

If you want to share how your gratitude practice went with me, I'd love to hear it! So feel free to reach out and let me know how this practice goes for you. I am grateful to hear how things are going with all of you, and I hope that this practice of gratitude helps shape your lives and center them on Christ, for whom we can always give thanks.

Now as we end our time together today, please join me in praying the words our Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.*

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God. Have a beautiful day everyone, Amen.