

Reversing Contracture
Preached by
Rev. Dr. Linda Even
United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection:

"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend."

Melody Beattie

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;
 and to you shall vows be performed.

To you who hear prayer, all flesh shall burn because of their sins.

When our transgressions prevail over us, you forgive them.

Blessed are those whom you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts!

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, Your holy temple!

By dread deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation,

who is the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of the farthest seas;

who by your strength established the mountains, being girded with might;

who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples;

so that those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds are in awe at your signs;

you make the morning and the evening resound with joy.

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;

you provide its grain, for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges.

softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty; the tracks of your chariot drip with fatness.

The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy,

the meadows clothes themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself in fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Sermon: Reversing Contracture

There is a story about told Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of NYC during the worst days of the Depression. On one bitterly cold January night, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest part of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge and took over the bench himself. An old woman in ragged clothes was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted his family, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving.

But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor. She's got to be punished to teach others a lesson."

LaGuardia told the woman, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." Even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and

tossed it into his hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The court room employees, police officers, petty thieves, lawyers and observers, who had just paid their fine, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Although I can honestly say I've never heard of a congregation giving a standing ovation to the stewardship committee for reminding us of the needs of the world (We might want to think about being the first), I suspect that, most of us feel as though sitting in that courtroom and being in church for stewardship season are a lot alike.

That couldn't be farther from the truth. To be sure, Scripture often paints a courtroom image with God as our judge. To be sure, we hear a clear and consistent call to compassion and justice—a call to which money is often a necessary response. We, however, sit in a court of far different venue than Mayor LaGuardia's, as admirable as it was.

In the courtroom where faith finds us, the difference is this: the judge provides not only the original \$10.00, but everyone's \$.50 fine as well as all the other money they have; the judge provides the bread, and the shop the bread came from, the clothes we wear to our very lives. Rather than having anything taken away from us, everything is given to us.

For the most part, we American Christians don't really believe that. We are embedded in a culture that tells us we are self-made -- that what we have, we have earned for ourselves. We forget all the ways we are helped along the way. How many of us had no families to nurture us? No teachers or coaches to guide us? Grew our own food? Bought our own clothes? Had no scholarships? No assistance from parents? No kindly relative slipping us a few dollars? Got no hand up from any family or church or friend when we needed it? Never spent a dollar we didn't earn? Got a great job simply because we happened to be in the right place at the right time? Had no pastor to comfort us? No spouse to encourage us? No child to help us in our old age? Had no rights and privileges of citizenship? Have no relatively safe places to live, clean water, and adequate health care? No freedom and opportunity for changing our lives? All those things came to us from God through others. And, if there are any among us, who had none of those things, they may be closer to being "self-made" than the rest of us—BUT—none of us are self-made—the talents we have and the lives we have been given are themselves gifts of God. We forget that we live and move and have our being in an ever-flowing stream of God's grace. And when we forget, we can think that what we have is ours for our enjoyment alone, and so wait to be fined into a response to a hurting world.

If forgetfulness is one thing that tightens our grasp on what we have, I suspect fear is another. We live in a world where terrorism covers the front page of every newspaper; the media shriek stories about pandemics, contaminated food and toys, a groaning planet, interests rates rising, extraordinary levels of gun violence, despair that results in family annihilation, rising health costs, dwindling retirement savings and a broken political system. We are afraid if we don't take care of ourselves and our own, no one will. So we protect ourselves with a barricade of purchases—we stock up, save up, store up, to secure a future we cannot guarantee—we with the gnawing sense that even this is not enough. Our enjoyment of what we have is shadowed by with worry that somehow its stream will dry up. Our hands clench around what we have, fearful that someone or something will wrench it from our grasp. We cling for dear life to what we have. The problem is that's not a dear life and certainly not the life abundant for which Christ came.

Together, forgetfulness of God's grace and fears of its limits lead to spiritual contracture of our hands and our hearts. We clench our hands in painful spasm around what we have so tightly that it is eventually impossible for us to open them either for our own enjoyment or in generosity. If we cling long enough and tightly enough, our ability to feel compassion and to respond to others declines—our heart's muscle contracts into a cramped spasm of insensitivity. Such contracted living is painful, crippled living. It brings no joy and bears no hope into the world. The good news is this: There is therapy to for the spiritual contracture of our hands and hearts.

The therapy is the practice of gratitude. Gratitude is not something we say. Gratitude is something

we do. Gratitude is not a feeling. Gratitude is a habit. Composing an annual sentence about family, friends or health for the Thanksgiving table blessing in the round is not sufficient to create a habit.

The habit of gratitude is: remembering and honoring of the Source of all that we have; taking care of what we have received; enjoying the use of the resources at our command; sharing them generously with others for our sakes and for the sake of God's whole world.

I suspect many of us are out of practice at the habit of gratitude. As with all habits – good or bad, they take repetition and intention to become habit. So we will take these crisp autumn days of church gathering, of blue skies, autumnal colors, the harvest of the fruits of the earth to practice, practice, practice.

This season, let our hands, to whatever degree they suffer from contracture, become our mnemonic for remembering and practicing habit of gratitude. This season, let us be grateful. Every time we wash our hands, crack our knuckles, flex our fingers, clean or polish our nails, trim our nails, clap our hands, begin to use our hands in our jobs, or smooth a troubled brow, let us name one thing for which to be grateful. If we are looking for some variety from the "big three" and seeking to expand and strengthen our skill, consider today's psalm.

The poet names God as the source and sustainer of all that is, and honors God with praise and vows of commitment. Throughout its length, it generates more ideas for gratitude and draws our minds to all the things God has provided. Psalm 65 is our invitation, our model and our guide for making this season and every season a season of gratitude.

There is therapy for the forgetfulness of God's grace. It is the constant and regular naming of the Source of our gifts, acknowledging that we all have comes to us as gift. We offer due praise to the One who answers all our prayers and make promises we intend to keep.

There is therapy for the anxiety that God's grace is not sufficient for all. It is being aware that in each and every moment of our lives we stand in the stream of God's grace as it waters the furrows of our lives abundantly, softens the hard and barren spots and nurtures our growth. The habit of gratitude can reverse the contracture of our hands and hearts. It can loosen our death-grip on self-made security and still our fears.

There is a way to reverse contracture of our hands and hearts. It is standing in the flood of blessing until it washes over us and through us – until our eyes leak tears of joy, until our lips spout praise, until the tide of our hearts rocks between joy and compassion.

Beloved children of God, with the habit of gratitude we can live in love as Christ loved us; we can be imitators of God, making fragrant offerings for the sake of the whole world. Let us accept the psalmist's invitation. As we give God God's due praise and make our vows, may these days of gratitude show forth in lives of open-handed generosity and heartfelt joy and hope.

Let us pray:

God whose giving knows no ending: Even in gratitude, we depend on the gift of your Spirit. Come to us now:

redeem forgetfulness with memory

fill silence with praise

heal fear with trust

replace fearful contracture of our hands and hearts with open-handed

heartfelt gratitude

In all things, make us imitators of you, in whose image we are created, that we might live in love, as Christ did now and forevermore. Amen.