

Thank You Notes

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, April 10, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”

We make a big deal over the phrase “thank you.” Have you seen that commercial where someone is in a tough spot, and gets out of it by saying “thank you”? One version of this commercial was a man and a woman having dinner together, and the woman asks, “Are we ever going to get married?” To which the man, who obviously did not have this conversation in mind responds, in a flustered tone, “thank you?” The woman melts, because she has yet to hear this powerful and poignant phrase. We make a big deal over the phrase “thank you.” It is a powerful phrase, one that is expected, said, and perhaps at times overused. You have said it, you have heard it, and you know the appropriate time to use it. We write thank you notes for our high school graduation gifts, our wedding gifts, dinner engagements, favors offered, and pardons granted. We offer thanks for doors opened, chairs moved, and other random acts of kindness. Thank you has become so expected that we say it out of routine regardless if the gratitude is deserved. The phrase assuages us of guilt; it justifies our irresponsible requests. “Thank you” is a powerful phrase, and perhaps that is why we find ourselves uttering it so much. We become like pigeons walking around with a bobbing head saying thank you again and again. The thank you notes can become mechanized, the words become meaningless and the sentiment can become forced. Anyone who has had to write a great deal of thank you notes can relate; by the 150th note, the “thank you” has lost its original meaning. Yet Gertrude Stein claimed, “Silent gratitude isn’t much use to anyone,” and we tend to agree and err on the side of overuse. The sin of omitting is difficult to recant. So we bob and we utter our thanks regardless if we mean it or not because we don’t want to offend anyone. We truly do make a big deal over the phrase “thank you.”

Especially in some churches, in a worship setting, we sometimes overdo our thank you. We are sometimes a little too quick to throw up our hands to express our thanks. We “count our blessings” without thinking about them. We mechanically start our prayers with thanks to God for all the good things, but we may have a difficult time listing those things. I was once at a youth conference, and one of the youth noticed that all the prayers started with a pronoun followed by the word “just” and then a word of thanks, “Father God, we’re just so thankful…” What does that say when the thanks in our prayers are that routine?

Sometimes people are bragging by saying thanks. Sometimes we want to let others know what exactly it is we have to be thankful. I have heard some preachers say that the Lear Jet, the nice car, and large home which they own are just signs of God’s blessings and they want to express their thankfulness for those blessings. At that time we overdo our thanks because we are no longer thanking, but bragging. Mrs. Turpin of O’Connor’s story *Revelation* is a person who thanks God she was born a white, middle class woman in the south, shouting loudly, “thank you Jesus.” Do you remember the story Jesus told about the rich man praying, saying in a voice that all can hear, “O Lord, thank you that I am not like those other people, those sinners”? This is not thanking God. This is not worship. The thanks are empty, shallow, and meaningless.

Maybe we find it too easy to give thanks to God in church. Maybe many of us are lifting up a

cross and just thanking God for all the gold and jewels that we have placed on it? Maybe many of us are lifting up our hands in an assumed and routine response of thankfulness?

Do you find it easy to give thanks in church? Maybe we aren't ready to offer praise. Maybe life is difficult, maybe life is hard, and maybe we can't see ourselves praising God because our heart is just too heavy. But we lift our hands; we utter our words of gratitude so we won't upset others, when we want to cry out with the Psalmist which we read today, "O Lord, save my life," instead we say, "O Lord, thank you for all you have given to us." Our heart and our mind are torn between feelings of obligation and our reality. Do you find it easy to give thanks in church? Because this is partly what we are here to do, give thanks. But we may overdo it, misuse the phrase, or abuse the phrase. Do you find it easy to give thanks in church?

We do need to say and to hear those words, "thank you." It is a necessary part of our mental well being, isn't it? We need to express and experience gratitude. We need to say "thank you" and believe it, and at the same time we need to hear those words for good things that we do. There have been studies concerning the effect gratitude has in one's life. One study, done at the University of California (see web site: <http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/labs/emmons/>) claims that individuals who keep a list of all the things they are thankful for tend to be happier, healthier, and have a positive perspective on reality. We need to take the time to realize how people are helping us, how individuals make a difference in our lives, and how our lives are affected in positive ways. We need to realize the good things we have in our life. Do you know Dr. Seuss' story of *Ooblick*? The whole trouble started with a king who didn't appreciate the four types of weather. He wasn't thankful for the sun, the rain, the fog and the snow, and wanted something new. His lack of appreciation caused a sticky, gooey mess to fall from the sky and his own realization of his selfishness and thoughtlessness was the necessary step he had to take to make the Ooblick go away. It humbles us to say "thank you" when we realize why it is we are saying it. It makes us realize how much we rely upon others, how we need others, and the effect others have on our lives. We need to say thank you.

We also need to hear it. We need to know that our deeds are appreciated; we need to know that all of our work is noticed. In one episode of the TV show, *Malcolm in the Middle* the four boys and the father all forget the mother's birthday. For her, this was a final straw from a family that never said thank you, and never appreciated the work she did, and she lost it and left. (She ended up in the batting cages) We need to be thanked. We need to be thanked because we are all doing something for someone at one time or another. We are taking care of parents, we are taking care of siblings, we are taking care of children, and we are taking care of each other. And we are being helped ourselves. If you are going to interact with another person, then you are going to offer something, or receive something. We need to offer and receive thanks. So I want you to turn around to the person next to you and say, "thank you for all that you do." And make sure you hear it as well. It is a necessary part of our human lives to offer and receive thanks. We need to hear and to say "thank you."

And, most importantly, we need to say "thank you" to God. We need to take the time and realize the ways in which God is active in our lives. Let's start with the Psalm. Let me ask you, have you been there with the Psalmist? Have you been to that place the psalmist was talking about? Have you found yourself at the edge of death? Have you found yourself at the point of despair? Have you felt the pangs of Sheol, the pangs of darkness threatening to come in, grab you and take you into an overwhelming state of hopelessness? Have you been there with the Psalmist? Do you hear the words he once uttered? Words of distress, words of hopelessness, and such anguish that he cries, "O Lord, I pray, save my life!" Have you been there with the Psalmist? Maybe you are there right now. Maybe life is difficult for you right now. Maybe you are feeling the weight of your troubles holding you down. Maybe it's trouble with health, trouble with money, trouble with school, trouble with friends, or trouble with family that is affecting your life. Maybe you are at the point where all you can pray is, "O Lord, save my life." Are you there right now with the psalmist? Have you been there before? Maybe you have gone through those troubles and you have come out on the other side. But can you still relate with the psalmist? Have you been there with the psalmist?

Now listen to the Psalm. Look where it goes, listen to what happens. God has saved, God has

redeemed, and God has brought salvation to the one in anguish and distress. Are you there now with the psalmist? The psalmist has been given what Walter Bruggemann calls a new orientation to life because of God's intervention. The first line is "I love the Lord." It is not "I will love the Lord," nor is it "I have loved the Lord," but "I love the Lord, and will always love the Lord - never ending." The psalmist's life has been changed, saved, transformed and redeemed and now he ready to declare his thanks. Are you there with the psalmist? Have you received salvation; have you come to the realization that Christ offers us life? Have you experienced that grace from God, which pulls us up out of despair, out of darkness, and out of the very pits of hell? Have you been redeemed by the grace of God, by the blood of the lamb, by the touch of our holy Lord? Are you there with the psalmist? This is what I am calling you to understand, to believe and to live. That God, the very same God who delivered the Hebrew people out of Egypt, the very same God who came, walked among us, and was resurrected, came to the psalmist and brought him healing. That God also offers you life, freedom, salvation, and redemption. That God offers you a new life with the psalmist, a life we are celebrating on this side of the Easter story, and a life we receive through the cross. That God promises to never leave you, no matter what the height, what the depth. God will never leave you, despite powers or principalities, hatred, injustice, sin or despair, God will never leave you. This is the experience of the psalmist, and it is what we are called to experience and to live and to believe with our life.

What can we say, but "thank you?" We need to say "thank you" to God for all which God promises, does, and will do. We need to thank God because God has given us life free from despair, free from hopelessness, from weight of shame, the weight of anguish and the weight of sin. We need to thank God, because God gives us a new hope for a new life. Now, I ask you again - when the psalmist says, "I love the Lord," are you there with him, saying those same words, and ready to offer thanks to God?

Now we are ready to worship. Now we are ready to be a gathered people who offer as one people, "thank you." Meditate on the Easter story, and then see how God is acting in your life. Then come and worship. The early Christian Arnobius claims that "true worship is in the heart," and only when our heart is in God's hands can we truly worship with praise and thanksgiving. Then start with the honest prayer. You may have come in here with a heavy heart; you may have come in here with a sullen spirit. Give them to God, as the psalmist did, know that God will be with you in your troubles, and now you may be ready to offer thanks. You can't offer thanks if you don't feel it, but when you do, then we worship. Offer your thanks for the life God has given you. It may be in a small voice, or it may be in a loud shout. Imagine you are in the hospital, waiting to hear about a loved one who was in an accident. Imagine the doctor comes out and says he or she will be ok. What is your reaction? Do you cry? Do you fall to the ground, overwhelmed with gratitude? That is the worship of thanks. It is that powerful, because it is life, which has been saved, and that is the intensity of thanks we are to offer to God in worship. Offer your thanks for the life God has given you.

Have you been to a testimony? Have you heard the story of salvation, the story of grace and redemption? That sharing within the body, within the family is the thanks we offer to Christ for a life saved. Offer thanks to God for the life God has given you. Have you stopped and thought what an amazing thing God has done with this church. When 200 years ago a band of people were moved by the Holy Spirit to gather and worship, God was with them. And here we are today; lives have been changed for the better, because of the witness of this gathering of Christ's body. Let us offer thanks with one voice, as one people. Lift up the cup of salvation, drink from it, and share that cup with others, thanking God for that cup. Sing the songs with a new heart, pray the prayers with a changed voice, and look at the cross with new eyes. Worship with a life that you have received through the grace of Christ. Give thanks for the life you've received from God. This is the worship we are called to do. Not a routine waving of hands and bowing of heads, but as John Wesley calls, a spontaneous shout of praise for the work God does and will do in our life. This is the thanks of worship.

And then we are called to shout out our thanks to the whole world. We are called to continue giving thanks and let the world know why. Shout with the psalmist in the court of Jerusalem. Shout with the psalmist in the center of the city that the Lord has redeemed, the Lord has saved! St. Augustine says that we are called to "sing with the psalmist, not love in hope, but to love in the results." That is what we

sing – not what will happen, but what has happened. That is the thanks we share.

Share your thanks with others, and then give them a reason to give thanks. Feed the hungry so that they may feel God’s grace. Clothe the naked so that they may offer God thanks. Visit the sick and those in prison so that gratitude will be known and experienced. Help a child learn to love, and help an adult to love the child. And with each deed, with each act, tell them that you do this because the Lord has saved your own life. This is how we show our thanks to the Lord outside of worship – by serving and loving all of God’s children. God has given us life, and wants others to have life as well – can you follow Christ into the world and show your thanks? Can you walk with Christ into the world and live your thanks? Christ is going into the places where others are crying, “O Lord, save my life,” will you go with him? Will you go into the despair of humanity and say, the Lord has saved my life, so I will serve you? Will you follow Christ as a gracious servant? Share your gratitude with others, bring others to Christ, and serve others as Christ calls us to serve. Let them say that this church is different because we give without asking. Let them say that we as a people are different because we serve without looking for glory. Let them say that we are a people full of thanks, a people full of love and a people of God.

AMEN