**Living a life of Gratitude – week 1**

**Sermon Title: Why Gratitude?**

**Colossians 3:15-17, Matt 2:1-12**

**October 25, 2026**

Over the next several weeks, we are going to take a deep dive into gratitude and thankfulness, following the work of Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful: the subversive practice of giving thanks.*

Why a series on gratitude? Well, if you're like me, there may be lots of things in your personal life that you are thankful for, but when I look at the larger world, being grateful is a real struggle right now. Who else is there with me? Friends, I need a reminder – and I imagine that you do too, that as people of faith, God both calls and enables us to live into a spirit of gratitude in both our private and public lives. So, as we enter this season of Thanksgiving, we are going to attend to gratitude for more than just a day or too.

Another reason I want us to spend some time with this topic, is that gratitude is good for us. Over the last

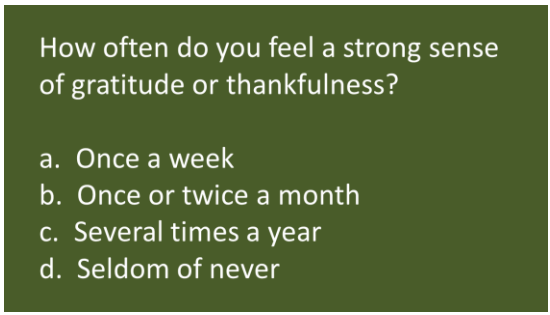
two decades, researchers have discovered links between gratitude and our health. Gratitude drives out the toxic emotions of resentment, anger, and envy and may be associated with better long-term emotional and physical health in heart transplant recipients. People who are grateful sleep better, are less depressed and less tired. Gratitude promotes regular heart rhythms, rebalances our hormones, reduces stress, and even promotes resistance to common illnesses. In addition, gratitude can increase our self-esteem, enhance our will power, strengthen and deepen our relationships, our creativity and even our productivity.[i] I can use some help in many of these areas, can't you?

If those aren't reasons enough to be grateful, gratitude is an important spiritual discipline. Throughout Scripture we are encouraged to give thanks. We heard this encouragement in the Scripture that ?? just read for us. In I Thess 5:16-18, we are reminded to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all things. In the psalms, in particular, repeatedly remind us

to give thanks. We'll talk more about this in the weeks ahead.

Let's start with a definition. (PAUSE) How would you define gratitude? (PAUSE) Is it a feeling that wells up in us in response to something we have received or experienced? Or is gratitude an action we take – by thanking a gift giver or reciprocating in some way? The answer can be both/and, manifesting in a variety of ways.

But as we begin, let me be quick to acknowledge that living a life of gratitude is complicated. A number of years ago a survey on American religion and spirituality asked the question



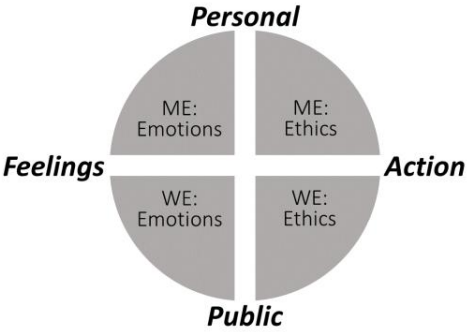

How would you answer? 78% of the respondents, both people of varying religious faiths and atheists said they had felt strongly thankful in the last week. Yet other

survey data showed that Americans are anxious, angry and discontent. How can both of these things be true?

One sociologist suggested that when almost 80% of people answer the same way on a question, many aren't quite being truthful. They are likely answering in a way that makes them look good to themselves or others, or that matches the image of the person they aspire to be.[ii] In other words, they want to be grateful and to be seen as thankful people, but there is likely a significant gap between what they aspire to or believe and what they actually practice.

Gratitude is also complicated, Butler Bass asserts, because we have a gratitude gap – a disparity between our private feelings and our public attitudes.[iii] A number of people that I see on social media can express gratitude for someone or something that happened in one post, only to follow it with a post that disparages politicians they disagree with or speaks ill of a particular group of people. Too often, we express gratitude within our family and social circles, but in more public spheres we find it easy to join in the fear, outrage and distrust that have

been rampant this election season. Here is one way to look at this phenomenon.




At the most basic level, gratitude involves 2 aspects of our experience: Our emotions – our feelings in response to gifts, and our ethics – our actions in response to gifts – both of these function in our individual lives and our public lives. Each of us more easily gravitates to one aspect of gratitude more than another.

If you emphasize me and emotions, you are probably attuned to awe, surprise, and appreciation – and you have strong feelings when someone helps you, serves you, or gives you a gift. You define gratitude in terms of delight, joy or surprise.

If you lean toward me and ethics, you might experience gratitude in terms of individual responsibility

and reciprocity – returning dinner invitations, writing thank you notes, and repaying personal obligations come naturally to you.

If you emphasize we and emotions, gratitude might well up in you when you are with others expressing appreciation – singing the national anthem, celebrating a victory of a favorite sports team, worshipping in church or gathering around the family table You experience gratitude through family and community celebrations and festivities.

Finally, if you emphasize we and ethics, you might define gratitude as social responsibility that demands action through public commitments to charity, stewardship, volunteerism and social institutions. You believe that gratitude is an essential foundation of civic life, taking pride in doing good.[iv]

In her book, *Grateful: the Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks,* Diana Butler Bass wonders what our society might be like if we all practiced gratitude in both our private and public spheres, with our emotions and our actions! (PAUSE)

One of the things that makes practicing gratitude in both private and public spheres has to do with how both the perception and the definition of gratitude have changed over time.

We often experience gratitude along with other emotions. For example, if our dog gets lost and a neighbor brings him home, we are indeed grateful. But we're also relieved he was found. When we finish a big project at work or at school, we may feel a sense of satisfaction and thankfulness, but we may also hope for a reward – a good grade or a bonus perhaps. When some one that we love has suffered a long illness and then passes away, we experience grief and sorrow, but we may also be grateful that they are no longer suffering and that they are now at peace and rest. (PAUSE) It's complicated. (PAUSE)

Butler Bass asserts that three things are true about gratitude. As just described, the context or situation matters and the emotions that weave into gratitude can vary widely from relief, appreciation, and release, to surprise, wonder and awe, to gladness and joy. Add this

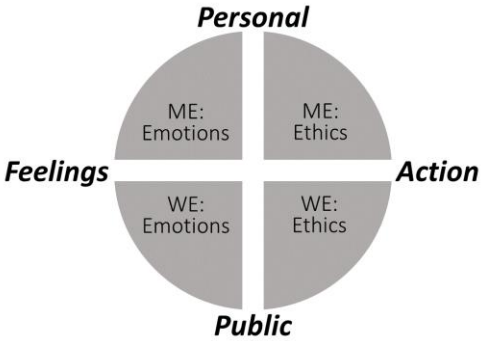
to the idea that gratitude is usually an unplanned response. It arises in us spontaneously and it is rarely the same from one incident to another.[v] (PAUSE)

So yes, gratitude can be complicated, it involves our emotions and our actions, but it is often also seen as an exchange. As we noted a moment ago, for centuries, gratitude has been understood as an obligation to repay a favor or gift. If someone gives you a gift, you are then required to offer a gift or a favor in exchange. If someone invites us over for dinner, we bring a hostess gift and reciprocate with a similar invitation. At a societal level, we see it during elections all the time. Individual or corporate donors make large gifts to a candidate, fully expecting jobs in the new administration, the passage of particular legislation or some other type of political favor. It is quid pro quo. (PAUSE)

Back in the days before democracies were common, a king or wealthy land owner would provide the gift of protection and provision. In turn, subjects offered loyalty, homage, service, and taxes. In this scenario, benefits flowed down from privileged

benefactors to regular people, but most of the wealth flowed up from the subjects in the form of gratitude to those at the top. Gratitude wasn't a feeling or a chosen action, it was an obligation -- even the law. If you failed to comply, you were branded an "ingrate" which could lead to enslavement, prison, exile or even death.[vi]

In response to these unjust and unequal structures, European philosophers like John Locke began to argue that public life and politics should be separated from gratitude.




As a result, society began to change. Gratitude became exiled to the private sphere where it came to be seen as a "feminine" virtue – and what did that mean? It came to be seen as "less than" – it lost its intellectual grounding and was relegated to "mere" feelings.

Here in the United States, where self-sufficiency and individualism are highly prized, and where we are expected not to depend on others or become indebted to them, feeling grateful can unfortunately be perceived as weak. (PAUSE)

The good news this morning is that Scripture totally upends many of these unhealthy and outdated ideas about gratitude. In Luke chapter 2, the magi – wealthy travelers from the east arrive at the home of new parents Mary and Joseph. Custom would dictate that the young couple pay homage to the wealthy travelers, but what happens instead? The truly wise magi bow down to the baby, presenting lavish gifts – with no expectation of anything in return. (PAUSE) When the baby Jesus becomes a man, we see him healing and blessing, feeding thousands – sometimes even providing enough for left-overs,– often without being asked or expecting repayment of any kind. He tells stories about sewing seeds with abandon and throwing lavish parties for prodigal sons – without knowing whether they come home repentant or not. (PAUSE)

Butler Bass calls these untagged gifts - - gifts that aren't meant for a specific person, but gifts that simply are. The gifts are not obligations to be repaid; they are simply to be enjoyed. There are no expectations of quid pro quo exchange, no transactions are involved. (PAUSE)

Friends, how often do we see God as a Heavenly Benefactor who must be repaid out of fear or obligation? How often do we see our interactions with God as transactional instead of relational? (PAUSE) Instead, what if we view God as the Generous and Indiscriminate Giver who seeks to move us toward mystery, awe, wonder and into love of neighbor? What if we sought to move beyond the cycle of obligation and into a larger circle of shared gifts, beyond reciprocal exchange toward mutual enjoyment and responsibility for those gifts?[vii] Oh, what a wonderful world this would be.

Invite people into breath prayer exercise.

And all God's people said, Amen.

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[ii] Diana Butler Bass, Grateful: the Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks, pp. 28-29.

[ii] Ibid, pp. xiv-xv

[iii] Ibid, xviii.
[iv] Ibid., xxvi, xxvii
[v] Ibid., 7-8
[vi] Ibid., p.11
[vii] Ibid., p. 27.