

Saturday, November 20, 2010

I Am Grateful

A number of years ago I served a good supportive congregation, but was not content. I was instead disappointed that I had not been chosen for a new call. During that period I began to earnestly study Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul was in prison. His future was dim. Yet, among other important faith professions in that letter, he wrote "I have learned to be content with whatever I have" and "rejoice in the Lord always!"

I prayed to have Paul's outlook. I wondered about how I could daily possess that perspective. I became aware that when someone asked me how I was, my standard remark was, "I am good."

So, I made a simple change to help me remember Paul's perspective. From then on when someone asked me, "How are you?" I responded, "I am grateful."

I need to add that I am not *always* grateful. It is more like a prayer, "God help me in all circumstances to be grateful." It is a simple public confession to remember that in my baptism I am called to be steward of the mysteries of God. God has entrusted me with everything I have and am. I am not entitled to the life, wife, family, church, time, talent, money and opportunities that God has entrusted me to steward.

Sometimes this response is tested. When our 39-year-old son-in-law had a complete blockage of his right carotid artery causing a major stroke, my perspective was challenged. In the midst of fear, grief and anxiety, I was eventually able to mumble, "I am grateful that God has provided medical resources to save his life; and for the support of family, friends and an attentive pastor who have prayed the prayers we were not able to utter."

In 2006, I told this story to a congregation that I was consulting. I particularly recall looking at a woman named Agnes. Her face was filled with as much discontent and disgust as anyone I had ever met. However, when I returned to the congregation five weeks later; Agnes came to me. I hardly recognized her due to the big smile on her face.

She immediately told me her story. "I work as a dispatcher in our local police department. I get yelled at a lot, but I decided to accept your challenge. Ever since that time, whenever someone in the department asks me, 'Agnes, how are you?' I give them a smile and tell them, 'I am grateful!' They are surprised when they look at me. Some even say, 'What the heck has gotten into you?'"

When you are out and about and someone asks how you are, I challenge you to be like Agnes and respond, "I am grateful!" You will be surprised at some of the responses you will get. It will also help you to remember that you have the privilege and responsibility to be a steward of all God has entrusted to you.

Jerry Hoffman
Director of the Center for Stewardship Leaders
Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

More thoughts on being grateful . . .

"Gratitude unexpressed is just as dangerous as guilt unforgiven."

—Unknown

"I am sure that we humor God more if we gratefully accept the life he gives us with all its blessings, loving it and drinking it to the full ... than we do if we are insensitive toward the blessings of life and therefore equally insensitive toward pain"

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letters and Papers from Prison"

"A generous heart will be formed by a gratitude that remembers what all God has done for you."

—Dave Johnson

"Gratitude has the power to transform your outlook and open your eyes to life's fullness. It can transform a trinket into a treasure, a meal into a feast, a deficit into a gain."

—Louise Rousseau, "Living With an Open Hand"

"To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything he has given us—and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of his love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from him. Gratitude, therefore, takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference."

—Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"