

Gratitude – Brain Fertilizer

(Luke 17:11-19) (85, 86 HWB)

Today we will take a break from looking at First John. So let's study a foundational trait we need to keep improving for the benefit of God's church for the next 500 years. If you remember this last summer we reflected on what core competencies we need to get better at, so our witness has more power, helps us be more faithful and draws people's attention

It's been interesting to pastor in different conferences because each one has their distinctive habits, culture and traits. And it is fascinating how each conference views other conferences. For example, I was told, one conference views themselves as seeing the glass half full. This group thought another conference viewed the glass as half empty.

In other words, the half full conference operated out of a sense of abundance and the other conference often seemed focused on scarcity – lack of resources. Historically and overall – I thought there was some reality to this, but not totally. Both groups are based in the same geographic area and have similar levels of income. But this observation didn't fit every congregation in each conference. Also I did notice the group that seemed more grateful, tended to be healthier by a number of measures, and their congregations tended to be easier to pastor.

So this Thanksgiving Sunday, let's consider the benefits of being thankful, grateful, and appreciative. Let's be half full cup people.

To repeat the Bible story, 10 lepers cried out for help. Jesus healed them. But only one, a Samaritan, returned to Jesus to thank him.

This story actually happened, it wasn't a parable. But Jesus telling this story, was not an act of being politically correct. Why?

No one likes it when it's pointed out that a foreigner did something good and people of our own town, or tribe, or nationality, didn't.

So let's look at why gratitude is such an important and powerful habit, especially now that there is research and science for it.

It's been discovered that a habit of gratitude can actually protect us from the detrimental effects of witnessing trauma. After the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in 2014, people were asked a variety of questions including the kinds of post-trauma symptoms they experienced in the months following the event. The participants' general personality traits of gratitude and resilience were also tested. Resilience was defined as the ability to be flexible during periods of instability and to successfully confront adversity.

The study results showed the individuals who already had higher levels of gratitude before the shooting were better able to turn their post-traumatic stress into growth. This is quite profound. It suggests that if we can help ourselves and others feel more grateful on a daily basis, we can actually prime ourselves to handle the trauma that life will inevitably bring. The researchers concluded that cultivating a habit of gratitude helps us when PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder occurs – and we all experience nasty surprises in our lives.

I think we have known all along that a spirit of gratitude helps us be mentally healthier persons. But it's nice when science affirms our experiences. The Samaritan leper must have been the healthiest of the 10 lepers, because of his grateful attitude and spirit.

In your sermon insert are the results of one study. And maybe this next list will help us realize how powerful and beneficial the habit of thankfulness is for us. Charles Stone says

gratitude is a brain fertilizer. I like thinking that thankfulness is brain fertilizer. He lists the results of various research.

Gratefulness can give us more energy. In one research study, participants kept a daily journal listing what they were grateful for. Another group recorded what annoyed them. Those who kept a 'gratefulness' journal had more energy and enthusiasm, plus were happier than the other group.

Gratefulness can help us become more others-centered. Another study had people journal daily what they were grateful for. In addition to more energy, enthusiasm and happiness, they discovered this group reported that they were more inclined to help others with a personal problem.

Gratefulness can help us sleep better. A Chinese study discovered that not only did gratitude improve sleep, but decreased depression and indirectly lowered anxiety. We all know refreshing sleep helps our brains and memory work better. So, start and end your day with a grateful heart for more rejuvenating sleep.

Gratefulness can make us physically feel better. When we are grateful, we activate brain regions associated with the feel-good transmitter dopamine. Gratefulness increases the mood neurotransmitter serotonin and the trust hormone oxytocin. When dopamine is released in us, it evokes a "do that again" response. So, a grateful heart can feed on itself and help us want to repeat it. It's called the 'virtuous cycle.' We simply have to start the process by choosing to be grateful, and keep it going.

Gratefulness can help us become less materialistic. Several studies have shown that people with higher levels of gratitude are

more likely to have lower than average traits of materialism.

This finding reminds us of Paul's message in Acts (20:35): "In every thing I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"

Gratefulness can help combat negativity and the negative emotions that follow.

Because our brain has five times more negative circuits than positive ones, we naturally tend to focus on the negative. Have you noticed this? Our brain has five times more negative circuits than positive ones. It's called the brain's 'negativity bias.' So it's important to be habitually thankful. It forces our brain to think about the positive.

The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praise worthy - think about such things." (Phil. 4.8)

So gratefulness gives us more energy, we become focused on others, we sleep better, we feel physically better, we become less materialistic, and it helps us combat negativity and negative emotions like feeling sorry for ourselves, jealousy, laziness, anger, and other ways of thinking that do ourselves in.

We need to be like the Samaritan leper. And not like this person. Two old friends met each other on the street one day. One looked forlorn, almost on the verge of tears. His friend asked, "What has the world done to you, my old friend?"

The sad fellow said, "Let me tell you: Three weeks ago, my uncle died and left me forty thousand dollars."

“That’s a lot of money,” his friend said.

“But you see, two weeks ago, a cousin I never even knew died, and left me eighty-five thousand dollars, free and clear.”

“Sounds to me that you’ve been very blessed,” the friend responded.

“You don’t understand!” the sad man interrupted. “Last week my great-aunt passed away. I inherited almost a quarter of a million dollars from her.”

Now the man’s friend was really confused. “Then, why do you look so glum?”

The sad friend responded –
“This week . . . nothing!”

Not only does science speak to gratefulness, in some studies faith has been found to play a role in resilience in disasters. One study found that, “gratitude helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals.”

Scripture often tells us to praise God and others. The word “thanks” and its various forms appear in the Bible more than 150 times. Plus, gratitude and appreciation have been cherished virtues in church history.

If the history of humanity reveals anything, it is that we are dependent creatures. We depend on the rain falling, the sun shining, the doctor curing, the asteroid missing, the government building roads, and the support of family and friends. There really are no self made people. In our best moments, we know this, and that knowledge should produce gratitude.

And when we turn our focus from ourselves to Jesus, paradoxically we are the ones who benefit. “The self,” in the words of Robert

Emmons, “is a very poor place to find happiness or meaning in life.” Perhaps a reason for some of our problems is we think too highly of ourselves?

So all the praise and thanks in the Bible – to God and to people, are examples for us to follow, in every part of our lives. Work, spouse, friends, children, family and so on.

Organizational consultant Sean Doyle says that when we “reframe the events of our lives in positive ways and include a glimmer of gratitude, we increase our sense of coherence with the world.” Such glimmers can lighten our misery and energize us for more effective service - in the workplace and in life.

Jesus said to the leper, “Rise & go your way; your faith has made you well.” Jesus said to the Samaritan – the foreigner, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

I wonder how the nine felt when the man, rising from his worship, finally caught up with them, telling of his grateful exchange with Jesus. The 9 missed the opportunity to deepen their elation by giving thanks. The grateful man received more than the other nine because “he had his cure confirmed particularly with Jesus’ affirmation: “Thy faith hath made thee whole.” The nine had the cure. The one had the cure – plus a relationship with Jesus.

The Roman philosopher Cicero was on to something when he said, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.”

In fact, high levels of gratitude explain more about psychological well-being than 30 of the most commonly studied personality traits.

It's also the most basic Christian attitude. Paul tells the Thessalonians to “give thanks

in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18).

May we be inspired by the example of German pastor Martin Rinckart, who served a town that became a refuge for political and military fugitives during the Thirty Years War in Europe. The situation in Eilenburg was bad even before the Black Plague arrived in 1637. One pastor fled. Rinckart buried another two on the same day. The only pastor remaining, he conducted funeral services for as many as 50 people a day and 4,480 within one year.

Yet Rinckart is best known for writing, in the midst of the war, the great triumphant hymn of thanks that we will be singing.

How many of us could focus on God's blessings with death and hardship all around us? Some of us have been able to focus on God's blessings despite sorrow and trouble. And gratitude probably had a lot to do with being able to live on with joy and faith and gratitude. May we grow this important brain fertilizer – gratitude.

If we've forgotten the language of gratitude, we will never be on speaking terms with happiness. Don't forget the language of gratitude today and every day! It's a key part of being a witness for Jesus. It gets the next 500 years of church history off to a good start!

May we continually, "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits - who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit the crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagles." Psalm 103: 2- 5