

*Being Thankful*

Returning back to our words of assurance this morning, I love that first line of the contemporary rendering of Psalm 34 that we heard, with the opening question, *but how exactly do I do this?*, and then the beautiful response, *by opening my heart in gratitude and praise for all the gifts of life.*

Both the question and the response I think are worthy of some attention today.

The question—*but how exactly do I, or how exactly do we do this?* How do we best make our way in this world, through this life, where our little ship can so easily be overwhelmed by waves of both beauty and sorrow; where our little hearts can so quickly burn like fire or turn cold like winter; where we wake up each morning facing something of the same conundrum that the essayist E.B. White pointed out when he said, *“I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”*

And then, of course, again, we have the beautiful response—how exactly do we do this, well, we do it first by opening our hearts in gratitude and praise for all the gifts of life.

And to this we might add—gratitude for all the gifts of life, and gratitude also for the gift of life itself.

*Gratitude for the gift of life itself.*

Like most people I imagine, I hope to think of myself as a pretty grateful person—not the most grateful person certainly, but pretty grateful—and I know that I’m not the most grateful because in my life that honor would have to go to my mom—I think of her as someone who simply exudes gratitude, perhaps you know somebody like this as well. Sometimes even, when I ask her, “Hey mom, how are you, how’s it going?” She’ll respond not, “I’m good, or I’m fine, or I’m doing well,” but she’ll say something like, “I’m grateful,” or more likely given her personality, she’ll say in her bubbly and infectious way, *“Oh, I’m just so grateful for everything!”*

This week, thinking about Thanksgiving and about trying to begin this week today with you hopefully from a place of equally bubbly and infectious gratitude, I found myself wondering in fact how grateful do I tend to be on average—or to what

extent do I actually let gratitude define, as I believe it should, both who I am and what I do.

To answer this question this week I went online, and I made the perhaps mistaken choice of taking a couple of those online quizzes—quizzes, in this case, that supposedly test your level of gratitude. Maybe you've noticed how there seems to be a short quiz for just about everything online these days...quizzes on everything from "How liberal or conservative are you?" to "Which National Park should you to visit?" to "Which song should you play on repeat this weekend?"

Anyways, I took the first online gratitude test, and I pressed the submit button, feeling like maybe I only slightly exaggerated my answers in the gratitude direction. And then the page came up, and I read, **your gratitude score: 66 out of 105**. I reached for a calculator, but I knew it wasn't good—about 62 percent, a solid D if this gratitude thing were a college course. The quiz gave me the following advice: *Your response suggests you are a somewhat grateful person. You sometimes foster gratitude by focusing on what you have rather than what you don't. Still, it seems that you could benefit from trying to do all this more often. Studies suggest that nurturing gratitude could bring more positive emotions, better health, stronger relationships, and greater life satisfaction.*

Okay, 62% not too great, really. So I tried another online gratitude quiz. This one required me to add up my own score and as I was typing those numbers into the calculator, again I was feeling pretty good about my gratitude prospects. And then I looked at the key about how to interpret the results of this quiz.

Tier one—"**Extremely high gratitude.** People who score in this range have the ability to see life as a gift. For them, gratitude is a way of life."

Hey, that's great, I thought, that's exactly what I wanted to preach about this week, how life is a gift, and how gratitude is a way of life. In, fact, I couldn't have put it any better myself—thank you online gratitude quiz. But then I looked at my own score, and I didn't even come close to making the cut. The next tier—**very high gratitude**, nope, I wasn't quite there either. Next—**high gratitude**, nope, not there yet either. It turns out on this quiz I ended up right in the middle of the **average gratitude** range, neither too ungrateful nor grateful enough, somewhere in-between, average gratitude.

At this point I saw a trend developing that didn't look promising, and so I decided to save the rest of the gratitude quizzes for another day. Clearly I've got some work to do yet on this front, and so I for one am grateful for today and for this Thanksgiving week where gratitude always returns to the front and center of our focus.

One of my personal Thanksgiving traditions is that each year I try to spend some time thinking back on and researching what historians have to tell us about that original Thanksgiving in Plymouth, Massachusetts during the fall of 1621, and each year different themes from that foundational event emerge as significant. Somehow each year I still find it surprising, for example, to note the differences between now and then—how, for example, venison and lobster and duck were likely the main courses rather than turkey, and how, tragically, pumpkin pie hadn't even been invented yet.

And of course there are more serious questions that we encounter each year when we think about Thanksgiving—how for example, the original spirit of cross-cultural fellowship and hospitality that is at the heart of this holiday also reminds us of the failures of fellowship and of the tragic inhospitality that followed soon in the aftermath of Thanksgiving, such that many of the contemporary Wampanoag peoples who really made this first feast possible, now refer to it instead of Thanksgiving as a National Day of Mourning.

One of the details that I've found interesting to note this year is that when we think about that three-day feast in 1621 we tend to think about it as the First Thanksgiving, whereas when we try to think about it from the perspective of the Wampanoag tribe, we find that this feast wouldn't have been their first Thanksgiving, and it wouldn't have even been their second Thanksgiving, but instead it would have been the 5<sup>th</sup> out of 6 yearly Thanksgiving celebrations.

In this yearly cycle of Thanksgiving, a cycle stretching back for thousands of years, the spring was marked as the beginning of the year with a Maple Dance, giving thanks to the Creator for the maple tree and its sweet sap. The second thanksgiving was known as The Planting Feast, whereupon the seeds for the upcoming year were blessed and planted. The third Thanksgiving was the Strawberry Festival, celebrating the first fruits of the season sometime in early June. Later in the summer, the fourth Thanksgiving was celebrated as the Green Corn Festival, marking the ripening of that sacred crop. Late fall then brought the fifth Thanksgiving as a sort of harvest festival, which in 1621 happened to have been shared with a group of strange newcomers. And then finally, the sixth Thanksgiving occurred in late winter, and was known as the Ceremony of the Old Year.

Recently deceased Wampanoag tribal elder Gladys Widdis had this to say about her culture's understanding of Thanksgiving, she wrote:

*"Every day is a day of thanksgiving to the Wampanoag... We give thanks to the dawn of the new day, at the end of the day, to the sun, to the moon, for rain for helping crops grow... There is always something to be thankful for."*

As an example, she shared this memory of her grandfather:

*"[Growing up] we had only the wood stove downstairs. I remember (my grandfather) would get up and go downstairs each morning in the middle of winter. No matter if it was snowing or raining or sleeting, he opened every window in the house for at least five minutes. Then he would dance and sing and give thanks for the fire."*

I'm reminded here again of that first tier from the gratitude quiz—**extremely high gratitude**. *People who score in this range have the ability to see life as a gift. For them, gratitude is a way of life.*

Which seems to me, in the end, just about the same thing that we heard this morning in Psalm 100, when the psalmist writes, among other calls to gratitude, *"Enter into God's gates with thanksgiving."*

When we think about it really, how else could we ever hope to enter into God's presence, into the presence of the Giver of all that we are and have, if not through gratitude, through being thankful, through appreciating and welcoming what is as a gift from God. And so even if today you might, like me, only be able to muster an average level or about 62% percent gratitude, I trust that we can always start there, right where we are, and because there is always something to be grateful for, there are always occasions to grow in gratitude. And for that, thanks be to God.