

A Season of Joy: GRATITUDE

I Corinthians 1:4-9

*It is not happiness that makes us grateful;
it is gratefulness that makes us happy.*

A sermon preached by
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We have been talking about joy, and one of the sure signs of joy is a smile on your face. There's a reason for that. When your face smiles, it stimulates the hypothalamus, part of your brain that regulates body systems. This stimulus releases substances called neuropeptides, which unleash a cocktail of good brain chemicals. Serotonin acts as a natural anti-depressant. Endorphins are natural pain-killers. And dopamine stimulates the reward centers of the brain. So smile, and you start to feel better all over. Scientists say as little as twenty seconds of smiling can create positive chemical reactions that trigger happiness and joy. Even if you fake a smile and don't really feel it, it fools your brain into releasing the feel-good chemicals, and then you start feeling like smiling.¹ So I want you to turn to your neighbor and smile really big. And keep smiling throughout this sermon, and you will feel great when it's over! (Maybe you always feel great when the sermon's over, in one way or another.)

When you think about it, we do have many things to smile about, and that's why we're going to talk about gratitude today. That's our seventh pillar of joy.

The enemy of gratitude, our impediment to joy today, is envy. Envy is the enemy of gratitude. Envy is when we look around at what other people have, and we feel like we don't have enough, or we don't have what we deserve. Envy is a naturally-occurring phenomenon; we all feel envy from time to time. Somebody has a better car, a better house, a better job, more money, more fun—we can find lots of reasons to feel jealous of others. But if we harbor those feelings and don't just let them pass, they can cause great dissatisfaction in our lives. The Buddhists have a saying, "Envy toward the above, competitiveness toward the equal, and contempt toward the lower."² That is the human condition, I suppose. But it's the "upward comparisons" that are the most corrosive of our well-being. Envy will not allow joy in the house.

That's why envy made the top ten list of commandments. When Moses got the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai, there was envy in number 10, disguised as

covetousness, a word we don't use very much, but it means the envious desire for somebody else's something: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*"³ So just stop it with the envy already!

Easier said than done, of course. Archbishop Tutu offers several remedies for the sickness of envy.⁴ One is **motivation**. If you are envious over something someone else has achieved or owns, let that be a motivation to strive for that outcome in your own life. Do you want a better job, a better education, a better car, or a better house? Then work to achieve that outcome. Do you envy someone else's depth of faith? Then pray and learn and submit your life to God, and God will bless you with a deeper faith.

Another remedy for envy is **reframing**. When you become aware that you are jealous of something someone else has, choose to think differently. Is it really my goal in life to make a ton of money? Do I really need that big house and fancy car? Will these things bring me happiness? Probably not. Can I be satisfied with what I have and concentrate on the important things in life? Probably so. Reframe the situation, and you can avoid the poison of envy.

A third remedy for envy is what the Dalai Lama calls "**sympathetic joy**." That's the translation for the Buddhist word *mudita*. Sympathetic joy means that you can rejoice in the good fortune of someone else. Life is not a zero-sum game; others don't have to lose for you to win. Likewise, the good fortune of others does not mean that it is impossible for you also to succeed. Somebody else doesn't have to go hungry for you to have your piece of the pie. There's enough pie for everybody! Stephen Covey called this the abundance mentality.⁵ There are plenty of resources for life, so we can be happy for the success of others.

Mudita is a concept that affirms the interdependence of all living things, and it's very similar to the African concept of *ubuntu*, which means "I am because you are." Ubuntu says, "If you are well, I am better." Which is also similar to Paul's idea of the Body of Christ. If one part hurts, we all hurt. If one part is joyful, we can all be joyful, because we are all part of one another. We don't have to be jealous.

But the greatest remedy for envy is our pillar of joy today. Envy is the enemy of gratitude and impedes our joy. On the other hand, **gratitude** is the most effective antidote to the corrosive effects of envy. Realizing that we are so blessed, and being thankful for our what we have, renders envy ineffectual and releases our soul to sing with joy.

The importance of gratitude is common to many spiritual traditions: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, whatever. No matter your conception of God, you know deep down that God is good and that all the good in life is a gift. Both the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu talked about "the importance of gratefulness. It allows us to shift our perspective ...toward all we have been given and all we have. It moves us away from the narrow-minded focus on fault and lack and to the wider perspective of benefit and abundance."⁶ Our thesis sentence today quotes Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk: "It is not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy. Every moment is a gift."⁷ Gratitude moves us from counting our burdens to counting our blessings, and we discover that we have so much to be thankful for: from the tiniest flower to the grandeur of the cosmos, a meal, a bath, a bed, a roof, a friend, a song, a smile—the list just goes on.

Last week, DeeDee and I both told the story of Anthony Ray Hinton and his example of compassion. But his compassion flowed out of and was accompanied by his sense of

gratitude. Hinton was convicted of a double murder in Alabama in 1985, although he was innocent of the crime. He spent 28 years on death row before his conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court. In those years he developed a ministry of compassion toward the other death row inmates. When he was released, his heart was filled not with anger and bitterness, but with gratitude. He said, “One does not know the value of freedom until one has it taken away. People run out of the rain. I run into the rain. How can anything that falls from heaven not be precious? Having missed the rain for so many years, I am so grateful for every drop, just to feel it on my face.”⁸

Interviewed on *60 Minutes*, the reporter asked Hinton, “They took thirty years of your life—how can you not be angry?” Hinton replied, “If I’m angry and unforgiving, they will have taken the rest of my life.” His sense of gratitude for life gave him an amazing attitude of joy. He told the writer of *The Book Of Joy*, “The world didn’t give you your joy, and the world can’t take it away. You can let people come into your life and destroy it, but I refused to let anyone take my joy. I get up in the morning, and I don’t need anybody to make me laugh. I am going to laugh on my own, because I have been blessed to see another day, and when you are blessed to see another day, that should automatically bring you joy.”⁹

Living with gratitude connects us to one another—in the body, as *ubuntu*, with *mudita*. We are a community because we have all been blessed. We are a community of faith because we believe that our blessings come from God. So we give thanks together for our blessings. We worship the Giver of all good gifts together. We rejoice in praise because our hearts are full of joy. Our gratitude then motivates us to live with compassion for those who have not been blessed as we have: the hurting, broken, and needy people around us. And gratitude makes generosity possible, because we give out of the abundance of our blessings, grateful that we are able to do so. Then we are blessed even more in the giving. Are you still smiling?

Today our gratitude has a particular focus. Today is All Saints’ Sunday. Today we remember in particular the members of our church who have died in the last year. As Methodists, we don’t have actual saints like the Catholics do. But we expand our remembrance to the “communion of the saints,” as mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews. After listing all the great heroes of the Biblical story, the author says, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*”¹⁰ So on All Saints’ Sunday, we remember all those who have gone before us in faith, those known to us and those unknown. They paved the way; they fought the fight; they received the reward. And we are happy for them.

This week, David Phillips shared with me a Sunday bulletin from this church that a friend had found and given to him. The date was April 7, 1957. As I read through that bulletin, I felt a wash of nostalgia for the saints and the church of that era. I was not here. That’s about the time I was being baptized as an infant in the First Methodist Church in Camden, Arkansas. We were not even United Methodists then. But to read about this church on that Sunday was an experience of gratitude. Fred Roebuck was the pastor, who had a ministry of 21 years here that is still remembered. Herschel McClurkin was the youth minister, and he had notes in the bulletin on the youth activities for the week. Edna Earl Massey was the organist and choir director. There was a Senior High choir concert of

Easter music advertised for Sunday night. We had relationships with missionaries in Mexico and India.

Three couples—the Higgs, Evans, and Fraser families—had had babies the previous week. Little Baby Boomers. Six families were in the bulletin as new members. I didn't recognize any of their names. There was a Sunday School report of almost 1200 people in Sunday School the week before, along with a record of 821 visits, phone calls, and cards that had gone out to encourage and comfort members and friends.

I suppose I could be envious of the church back then. What an incredible experience that must have been! But that was a different era, a different century. Instead of being jealous, I choose today to be grateful. Grateful for this church and so many like it that provided ministry and a church home for so many over the years. Grateful for the saints that gave their time, energy, money, and talents to be a part of the community of faith and create a legacy.

And then I want to use my gratitude for motivation. Things are different in 2022 than they were in 1957. But one thing is the same. They were doing their best, and we are doing our best, to be faithful to our God. And I pray that a baby baptized into First United Methodist Church today will look back in 65 years and feel equally grateful for the witness and the nurture and the ministry that this church has provided. Motivated by generosity, I am encouraged to be compassionate and generous. And I am full of hope.

Our practice of joy today sits before you. As we come to the Lord's Table, our hearts are filled with gratitude. Another word for Communion is Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving." We are thankful today for Jesus, who gave us this meal. We are thankful for his grace which forgives our sins. We are thankful for the saints who have gone before us on this journey. We are thankful for this community of faith. And we are thankful for the hope that never dies.

Are you still smiling?

¹ Douglas Abrams, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 248.

² *Ibid.*, 135.

³ Exodus 20:17.

⁴ *The Book Of Joy*, 138ff.

⁵ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 219.

⁶ *The Book Of Joy*, 242.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244f.

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:1.