Sunday, November 25, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 6 in a Series: Gratitude)
Psalm 92:1-4; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

A young man, age 16, was working on a car in a garage with his dad, and this young man was complaining. He said, “I don’t owe the world a thing. I didn’t ask to be born.”

He was right in one way and completely wrong in another. It’s true that nobody asks to be born. But it does not automatically follow that we don’t owe the world anything or that we should feel or act ungrateful. We have a tremendous debt to the past, to those who have gone before us, and to God.

This young man had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys doing is a free gift from the past — his tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself — all were invented, developed, or improved by his ancestors. How many of us could survive at all without this incredible inheritance we accept so easily and sometimes so thoughtlessly?

Consider again the brilliant people, the patient women and men, and the dedicated individuals who labored, often without reward, on projects both great and small, from the steam engine to the safety pin.

This young man in the garage would be like a beast in the forest if it were not for better people than he. He would be without comfortable clothing and sufficient food, and he would be ravaged by disease and riddled with misery.

It has been said that no one of us contributes more than one millionth of one percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. And some individuals do not even contribute that much. The farmer inherits his tools from the wisdom of the past; the manufacturer depends upon the kind of brains that were more interested in progress than profit; the student in school at whatever level benefits from untold human hours of research and devotion.

The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start fresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet, and create multiplication tables? Who would discover the measles vaccine or penicillin? I could not. Could you?

In spite of all that has been given to us from the past, gratitude is an endangered character quality among us, and not only among the young people. An expensively dressed middle-aged woman and her husband were on a rather lengthy trip in a commercial airplane, and of course, they traveled first class. Once the seatbelt sign had been turned off, the woman began going about the first-class cabin from passenger to passenger with complaints about one inconvenience after another to anyone who would even pretend to listen. Embarrassed, her husband finally turned and said to the man across the aisle, “My wife is a manufacturer. She manufactures unhappiness.” He could also have said, “With her, gratitude is a very much endangered character quality.”

Gratitude has been an endangered character quality almost as long as human beings have existed. The ancient Stoic Seneca wrote, “There was never any man so wicked as not to approve of gratitude and detest ingratitude.”

St. Paul wrote in the New Testament that most of the malignancies that cramp the human spirit come from the lack of gratitude. He said in his words: “Although they knew God... they did not give thanks to God.” Karl Barth said that “gratitude is the one thing which is unconditionally and inescapably demanded of us.” Kant the philosopher wrote, “Ingratitude is the essence of vileness.” And Shakespeare has one of his characters in the play Twelfth Night say: “I hate ingratitude more in a man than lying, vainness, babbling drunkenness, or any taint of vice whose strong corruption inhabits our frail blood.”

What is it then in our culture and within us that makes gratitude an endangered character quality? Why is it that those who have had the most go right for them in life so often turn out to be the ones who are also the most picky, irritable, chronically dissatisfied, and least grateful?

Another puzzling question about gratitude is this: if we are not grateful for what we already have, what makes us think we would be grateful if we had even more?

Here then is the first principle that needs to be remembered about the character quality of gratitude according to our Christian faith. True gratitude is not dependent on what we have or don’t have. It’s not a matter of taking inventory. However, we’ve falsely been led to believe that the opposite is true — that the more we have, the more grateful we will be.
To put it another way — one of the most widespread barriers to developing the character quality of gratitude is the “can you top this” syndrome. We seem to think that only if this year is better than the last — then we will be thankful. Even though we might fiercely deny it, there seems to be for a great many of us an invisible line below which it does not occur to us to be grateful since we feel that all that’s below that line is our fair share, our right, what we deserve. And the more we get or have, the higher we raise that invisible line.

In other words, we believe that we have a certain minimum amount of good coming to us. Then if we get something extra, we’ll be thankful. Gratitude is reserved for the overrun... when the blessings go over the top, exceeding the line of what we expect or deserve.

This invisible line becomes what some have called the “barrier of ownership.” One of the most perceptive of the early Christian leaders in the third century, Cyprian, had this to say about the “barrier of ownership.” He was writing to and about his contemporaries, which shows that way back then, gratitude was already an endangered character quality:

“Their property held them in chains... chains which shackled their courage, choked their faith, hampered their judgment, and throttled their souls... They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is rather they who are owned, enslaved as they are to their own property. They are not masters of their money, but its slaves.”

Do you see the problem? That which we think we own soon becomes that which we think we deserve, and we are not usually grateful for what we believe we deserve in the first place. Some of us even go further in our thinking. Those who have more manage to convince themselves that this is because they are the natural beneficiaries of superior intelligence, diligence, foresight, energy, and morality, so therefore they believe they are entitled to more. But if we do have those attributes — those too are gifts.

The antidote is to see all that we have as gifts, even life itself, which is ours to care for. Then and only then will we be able to develop the character quality of gratitude.

Let me reiterate the first principle again. True gratitude in an individual is not dependent on taking an inventory of what we have or don't have. It rather depends on seeing everything that comes to us as a gift.

Here's the second principle. Developing the character quality of gratitude is dependent upon our being willing to see ourselves as interdependent instead of independent. Those who have the character quality of gratitude see themselves as being connected to everything else that is. They see the connectedness of all of creation. From the beginning, this has been one of the basic themes of our Christian faith, but it got covered up and lost. The emphasis is on independence — the belief that a single individual or a single nation can detach itself from everything else in the world and still survive. In this view of the world, the tendency is to see things in their separateness rather than in their connections, their interdependence, and their relationships.
So, for example, we have tended to see persons as black or white, or Native Americans, or Jews, or Christians, or Muslims, or Americans, or Russians. We tend to see people as adjectives rather than nouns. And when we do this, it is a natural step to go on to make some people inferior and others superior, which sets up barriers to trust and forgiveness.

If instead we are interdependent, then there is no one who is inferior or superior. We each have our own distinctive gifts and differences. We all need each other, and we can then become grateful for each other.

If we are to survive as a world, we have to be able to see ourselves as part of a unity that transcends all differences. The unity and connections have always been there — we have simply not always been aware of them.

Lewis Thomas puts it this way in one of his essays: "We are not made up, as we have always supposed, of only our own parts. Rather, we are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing much of what we need to live, are the tiniest mitochondria, and in a strict sense, they are not ours. They turn out to be separate creatures, very primitive bacteria, but without them, we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, or think a thought."

The more we become aware of our connectedness, the more we begin to develop the character quality of gratitude.

Here are several specific suggestions that will help each one of us to develop the character quality of gratitude.

First, begin to practice gratitude as a part of your everyday life. It is one of my firm beliefs that it's easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.
Practice gratitude. You can do this not only by saying "thank you" to the many people who are part of your life each day, but also by offering short prayers of thanksgiving to God throughout each day. It has been said that "thanks" is the only necessary prayer. Just a thought of thankfulness is a prayer in itself. The true saint is not the one who prays with the most words, does the most fasting, or is the most eminent for temperance or justice, but it is the one who is always thankful to God, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness, and who is always ready to praise God for it.

Begin to practice the quality of gratitude by writing short notes of thanksgiving to people, not only when you have received a specific gift from them, but at other times as well. For example,

this coming week, write two thank-you notes each day, each one to a different person — a total of fourteen thank-you notes to individuals who would least expect to receive them. William Stidger of the Boston School of Theology was thinking one day of the woman who had taught him in school many, many years ago. He had not heard from her in a long time. Although it was decades ago that she had been his teacher, he recalled the way she had put the love of poetry in him.

By making a number of inquiries, he discovered that she was still alive, and he got her address. So he wrote a letter of thanks. Not long after, he received this reply from her:

“My Dear Willie,” (he was thrilled by that salutation. He was over 50, bald, a professor, and didn’t think there was anyone left in the world who would call him Willie.)

“I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my 80s, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely, and like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught school for 50 years, and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered me as nothing has in years.”

Willie wept.

Gratitude is an endangered character quality, but it need not be so. In fact, there is a therapy in becoming a grateful person. Having the character quality of gratitude in abundance will make you a joyful, giving individual. St. Paul wrote, “Give thanks in all circumstances,” in other words, make gratitude a daily habit. Amen.