Sunday, November 22, 1992
BEING THANKFUL: A SHORTCUT TO HAPPINESS
Deuteronomy 8:17-19; I Thessalonians 5:16-19

I have never met a truly grateful person who was not also very happy. Similarly, I have never met a happy person who was not filled with thanksgiving. The reverse is also true: ungrateful people are always unhappy people. Happiness and being thankful go hand in hand; they are intimately related. In fact, cultivating a sense of gratitude is the sweetest way to embrace happiness. We can cut through all the misery in our lives by turning our attention to being grateful. Despite all the catastrophes that might occur, we can find in little and big ways bottomless wellsprings for our thankfulness. Gratitude then becomes the shortest of shortcuts to happiness.

That's why the Bible says: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." (I Thessalonians 5:16-19)

Since being thankful is a shortcut to happiness, and who among us does not want to be happy, I want us to look first at some of the reasons we have difficulty in being thankful and then, second, at some suggestions for cultivating a sense of gratitude — and hence, gaining happiness.

Why do some of us have trouble being grateful? What are some of the barriers?

One barrier to gratitude is the habit some people have of always comparing themselves to others. When they do this, they almost always feel that others have gotten more of the good things in life than they have, and a small seed of jealousy begins to grow in them. You cannot be thankful and jealous at the same time.

As I pointed out in the third sermon in the series on "Recovering Our Spiritual Heritage," when you begin to understand yourself as a spiritual being having a human existence, you can stop the incessant comparing that leads you to believe that others are more deserving or less deserving than you.

If you attempt to gain your sense of self-worth by always comparing yourself to others, you will never possess true self-worth. Furthermore, if you're always comparing yourself to others, then you will find it increasingly difficult to rejoice in the prosperity and good fortune of others. You're also so busy comparing and believing that you are worse off than many that there's no time or space left in your life for being thankful.

I have a very close friend in the ministry who discovered this the hard way. About 21 years ago, when he was in his mid-thirties and looking forward to a bright career, he discovered that he had a strange, incurable eye disease that was quickly causing him to go blind. A year or so before this shocking turn of events, he had been chosen as editor of a major religious journal, a position he had always dreamed of having. As he had more and more difficulty seeing, his work as editor also became more of a problem. His moods began to range between despair and anger. "What had he done to deserve this?" he kept asking himself. His doctor said his condition was permanent, irreparable, and irrevocable.

As his blindness increased, he resigned his position as editor and became the senior minister of a large church near Chicago. He was delighted to have this job because he had served several churches as a minister before becoming an editor, but now he wondered if he could do it. He could no longer drive an automobile and had become increasingly dependent on the help of others.

In 1977, five years after having gone blind, he wrote a book about his struggle to come to terms with his blindness. The title is An Elephant's Ballet. At one point in the book, he wrote, "I grew worse and worse so long as I lamented what I had lost. But when I could be thankful for what yet remained, then I grew better." This was a major turning point in his life.

Recently, my blind minister friend wrote in a letter that this principle is applicable in other areas of our lives as well. He said, "Many people, like me, spend time and energy complaining about what they do NOT have. In extreme cases, it paralyzes and destroys people."

I remember another minister friend of mine, Carlyle Marney, who died a few years ago. He once told of a young woman who was born without arms and legs but was deeply loved by her family. Through special training, she developed a fantastic mind and spirit. When she was 20 years old, her brother brought home a friend from college, a philosophy major, a sophomore. Sophomores in college seem to know everything and challenge everything.

After a few days in the home, this young sophomore philosophy major couldn't hold it in any longer. He finally asked the young woman, "Don't you wish that you had never been born? How on earth can you believe in a God of purpose and love when you look at yourself and see other people with arms and legs and the opportunities to move about and do and achieve? If I were you, I would curse whatever dealt me this."

The young woman answered calmly, "I wouldn't have missed the chance to be alive for anything in the world. I suppose what has been available to me seems very little compared to the opportunities many other people get, but when compared to not having existed at all — to never see, to never taste, to never smell, never hear, never know the delights of reading and thinking and relating — I am overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to live that has been mine."

If this young woman had spent all her time lamenting what she did not have by comparing herself to others, she would have grown worse and worse and spent her life in bitterness. She would not have developed a sense of gratitude and therefore would not have found happiness.

In addition to always comparing ourselves with others and frequently coming up short, a second barrier to gratitude is excessive pride. There are individuals who believe that all they have is the result of their own efforts. They have never needed help from anyone. They are totally self-made individuals. If you believe that, it's difficult to be grateful except to yourself. Imagine beginning each day thanking yourself for all you have done for yourself and others.

The Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament reminds us: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth."

Thankfulness is an acknowledgment that we live in an interdependent world. None of us could make it on our own. We did not cause ourselves to be born. When we were infants, someone

cared for us, fed us, clothed us, changed our diapers, and did a host of other things that kept us alive.

Life is a gift, and we have a tremendous debt to the past — to those who have gone before us — and to God, which we often take for granted. It has been said that not any one of us contributes more than one millionth of one percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start afresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet and multiplication tables? Who would discover the measles vaccine or penicillin?

We have looked at two major barriers to becoming thankful people. Now we turn to the positive with some suggestions that can help us become more thankful and therefore happier people.

While it's helpful to be thankful in general, if we truly want to cultivate a sense of gratitude, the more specific we become, the better.

For most of us, it's easy to talk about special experiences of awe and wonder. We can easily recognize such awesome and spectacular events as a birth, a Beethoven symphony, the panorama of the Grand Canyon as seen from the canyon rim, the first human steps on the moon, a heart transplant, or the heroic deed of one person helping another. However, we often fail to recognize the amazing events deserving of gratitude that occur all around us in each moment of every day.

Some people open their arms wide and say, "Oh, I am grateful to be alive," or "I am grateful for the planet, the universe, and everything in it." With one sweep of their arms, they sum up all their feelings. In doing so, they miss the true glory of gratitude.

The more specific we can be in our expressions so that we go beyond the abstractions and generalizations, the more helpful it is. This is true in developing our gratitude as well as in dealing with our discomforts. If someone begins to tell you in broad generalizations about how bad they feel, ask them for concrete examples of anxieties or annoyances. Or if someone tells you that he or she doesn't like a certain person, ask them to be specific.

This perspective applies equally to experiences of gratitude. The more specific we are in naming the details of why we are thankful, the more grateful individuals we become. We can train ourselves to be more sensitive to the many miracles of living. In the face of such awareness, gratitude and the happiness that always comes with gratitude will bubble easily to the surface.

As I stand here, I can think, see, and breathe, all rather effortlessly. Incredible! My heart continues to pump, sustaining my life and my consciousness. What an extraordinary machine! We take so much in life for granted. Look around you at this magnificent building, the beauty, the details, the color, the design.

Whenever we think we have lost our way or have noticed joy to be absent from our daily endeavors, we can look around and find a host of things, events, or people to appreciate. If we make the items specific, we will never exhaust the resources with which to fuel our gratitude.

Ari L. Goldman, in his book The Search for God at Harvard, tells how he spent a sabbatical year away from the New York Times as its religion editor to study at Harvard Divinity School. Ari is an Orthodox Jew, and he describes how he was brought up in the Jewish faith to be

thankful at every moment of every day for very specific things. “Upon waking, immediately wash your hands, then thank God for ‘restoring my soul’ after the night’s sleep. After using the toilet, thank God who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating openings, arteries, glands, and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design.” Following breakfast, thank God for the food and its taste. Each moment of each day can bring us something for which to be thankful.

Our Jewish ancestors learned early on not to be stingy and discriminatory with their gratefulness. We can reserve the expression of thanks for special occasions: Thanksgiving, a birthday, a marriage, a birth, an accident avoided. Or we can be lavish with our thankfulness for very specific things each day and therefore lavish with happiness.

I heard of a physical therapist who thanked each individual patient when they entered her treatment room. Then she asked the patient to take a moment to thank their bodies for supporting them and their life endeavors before she began her therapy. As a result, people relaxed more during her treatments and no longer resisted the gentle work of her hands.

In being specific in your gratefulness, here’s something you can also try. Make a list of those things that did not happen this day or yesterday or last week or last month. The world did not end. You did not die. Your child was promoted. You did not get fired from your job. Your health tests came back negative. Colorado and Kansas did not win over Nebraska. Be thankful for the many people in your life who did not let you down and name them to yourself.

Listen once more to the words of the Apostle Paul: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.” Amen.