Sunday, November 21, 1993
THE THERAPY OF THANKFULNESS
Psalm 92:1-4; I Thessalonians 5:16-19

An expensively dressed middle-aged couple were on a rather lengthy trip on a commercial airline, traveling 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 to anyone who would even pretend to listen. She complained about every possible inconvenience. Embarrassed, her husband finally turned and said to the person across the aisle, “My wife is a manufacturer. She manufactures unhappiness.”

There was a monastery where all of the brothers took a disciplined vow of total silence. They were never to speak a word. There was, however, one exception. Once every five years, each monk was permitted to speak two words to the Abbot who headed the order.

A new monk arrived at the monastery one day to begin his spiritual journey. After five years, he went into the Abbot’s office to speak his two words. All he said was, “Food bad.” He then got up from his chair and left. Five years later, he returned to speak again. This time his two words were, “Bed hard.”

After another five-year period, he returned for the third time. Now his two words were, “Want out.” “I’m not surprised,” said the Abbot. “All you’ve done since being here is complain.”

But there is another way to live, another way to face life, which instead of manufacturing unhappiness and complaining, produces abundance in blessings — not only for yourself but for everyone around you — and it comes right out of the Bible and the teaching and example of Jesus. It’s what I call the “therapy of thankfulness” or the “attitude of gratitude.”

The Apostle Paul said it this way in his letter to the church at Thessalonica: “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.”

Why is it frequently difficult for us to do this? Let’s begin by looking at some of the barriers to experiencing the therapy of thankfulness.

One of the most widespread impediments in our culture 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. Or, only if I do better than someone else with whom I like to compare myself, then I can be thankful. Even though we might fiercely deny it, there seems to be for many of us an invisible line below which it doesn’t occur to us to be grateful since we feel that all that’s below that line is our fair share, our right, our entitlement — it’s what we deserve. It’s a certain minimum amount of good we have coming to us no matter what. Then, if we get more than that, something extra, we’ll be thankful.

In other words, for too many of us, thankfulness is reserved for the overrun, the bonus, when the blessings go over the top, exceeding the line of our expectations.

A second barrier to experiencing the therapy of thankfulness can be called the “barrier of ownership.” We’ve always had trouble with this one. A Christian leader, Cyprian, back in the third century, said of some of his contemporaries, “Their property held them in chains... chains

which shackled their courage and choked their faith and hampered their judgment and throttled their souls... they think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they who are owned; enslaved as they are to their property. They are not masters of their money, but its slaves."
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. The antidote is to see all that we have as a gift which is ours to care for and be thankful for.

A third barrier to experiencing the life-changing therapy of thankfulness is to live primarily on the surface of life. People who live mostly on the surface are constantly finding fault. They are the complainers. There is always some little mistake that irritates them, some miscue, some little perceived injustice — something that keeps them from experiencing joy in their lives. Complaining people are seldom joyful or thankful.
Now let's look at the positive, at some of the steps we can take that will help us develop the very important spiritual attitude of gratitude so that we can experience the therapy of thankfulness.

Ask yourself this question and then answer it in your own mind: What is my most important asset? Conditioned as it is to material values, your mind might begin weighing the relative usefulness of things.

I want to suggest to you that your most important asset and my most important asset is the gift from God to choose the attitude you want toward life. To put it another way, God has given you the freedom and the power to direct your innermost world of mind and emotions.

Here's an example: We can allow events, people, things, and economic conditions to take control of us, or we can take control of them. Note, for example, how many people have become slaves to the wild fluctuations of the economy. Ask someone how he feels and he might very well say, "I will tell you after I read the stock market returns, or after I see what my tax accountant has come up with."

Or we can do what this remarkable woman did. She was told by her doctor that she had but six months or less to live. A shocking discovery of an incurable condition. One might expect her to have had an emotional collapse. But not this woman. She reported to work the next morning as usual. Her co-workers heard about the prognosis and were shocked. They hovered around, morbidly commiserating with her. Someone asked, "What will you do?" Her reply, "I will do what I have always done: live with a grateful heart, one day at a time."

This crisis was more than ten years ago, and the woman in question is very much alive and well, still living one day at a time with a truly grateful heart. It's not necessarily that the diagnosis was in error. It is more a testimony to the healing influence of a life sustained by the therapy of thankfulness. The important thing is that these ten years have been creative years, not just a dreary existence in anticipation of doom.

You might want to say, "Now at least she has something to be really grateful for. What did she have ten years ago?" But that is to miss the whole point. What her life has proved is that thanksgiving can be more than a reactionary emotion; it is a causative energy. It is an effective key by which anyone may meet life as a powerful conqueror.

Isn't it true that we usually consider gratitude and thanksgiving on the basis of obligation or in terms of counting our blessings? For instance, someone does something for us and we feel obligated to show some kind of appreciation.

When we were little children, our parents and others urged and taught us to say “thank you” when something was given to us — a birthday gift, a Halloween treat, a Christmas present. That makes a good beginning for learning to be thankful. It’s an important social grace, and it may help us along the way to develop the attitude of gratitude.

However, too many of us grow up and still think of thanksgiving primarily in those terms. That’s one very important form of thanksgiving, but we need also to move beyond it. We need to grow spiritually so that we begin to live our whole lives in the spirit of gratefulness — not only because of what it does for others but also because of what it does for us.

You know how people react if you are not grateful, but what about God? Will God be disturbed if you do not return thanks? The fact is, it doesn’t make any difference to God whether you are grateful or not. But it makes a lot of difference to you. God wants you to be grateful, not for God’s sake, but for your own spiritual development.

God is too Universal, too Almighty, too loving to be dependent on your thanksgiving. As I said in the sermon several Sundays ago, Meister Eckhart probably shocked his colleagues in medieval times when he said: “I never give thanks to God for loving me, because God can’t help it. Whether God would or not, it is God’s nature to.”

Gratitude is not for God. God doesn’t need our gratitude. You are not obligated to thank God for your life, for your job, for your family, for your prosperity. However, giving thanks to God is an important state of your consciousness that keeps you in an awareness of oneness with God’s divine flow.

When you understand this, you begin to see that being grateful does not need something to be grateful for. One can be grateful with the same spontaneity as being joyful. It simply flows forth from within and becomes a causative energy.

That’s why Paul said, as quoted earlier, “In all things give thanks.” Note that Paul did not say, “For all things give thanks.” By stressing, “in all things,” our faith is telling us that despite the problems of lack, or even because of them, the need is to get yourself re-centered in the awareness of the ever-flowing goodness of God. And the most effective way to do this is by thanksgiving.

The woman I talked about earlier who was told that she had six months to live may have had little to be grateful for. But she was grateful because she had a great reserve of faith to give thanks from. This is a basic spiritual principle that has been recognized and taught by great teachers of all ages, including Jesus. Plato said, for example, “A grateful mind is a great mind which eventually attracts to itself great things.” The grateful person really opens the way to the flow and becomes an attractive force to draw to itself great things.

There is an old saying that a donkey may carry a heavy load of precious sandalwood on its back and never know its preciousness, only its weight. You can go through life feeling only the weight of circumstances, never able to appreciate the precious nature of life.

Rather than looking at life from a high vantage point, some people see life with their head bowed down and eyes fixed only on the ground, and they perceive a world of lack and limitation and attract to themselves conditions of financial chaos.

And there are other people who realize the importance of a grateful heart and begin looking for things for which to give thanks. Unfortunately, they mistakenly start with the perspective of inadequacy and insufficiency and thus they simply become more conscious of limitations. The result is, rather than counting their blessings, they count what they envy: “He is so talented.” “She has so many lovely things.” “I wish I had a home like they have.” As a result of this very subtle process, they develop, paradoxically, “ungrateful hearts.”

The grateful heart draws to itself great things. The ungrateful heart — the discouraged, complaining, covetous level of thought — will draw to itself limited things.

Remember that in God’s economy there is abundance everywhere, so give thanks. This is not to say that you should give thanks for a job that is unpleasant, or for the last penny if your supply is totally inadequate. That would be to kid yourself and to be intellectually dishonest. The job is not a symbol of misfortune and the penny is not a symbol of lack. Both are evidence of the activity of Spirit manifesting in part. So you give thanks, not for these things, but from the awareness that there is always an all-sufficiency even within the insufficiency.

The classic example of this principle is the Gospel story of Jesus dealing with 5,000 hungry people. The disciples reported that the only food they could find at hand was one boy’s lunch consisting of five loaves and two fish — obviously inadequate to meet the need.

Jesus, starting with what he had, took the boy’s lunch in his hands and, experiencing the presence of God, gave thanks. This was not reaching up to God, for Jesus had once clearly said that the kingdom of God is within you and among us.

Jesus was not giving thanks for the inadequate lunch. No, he was giving thanks because he knew that the presence of abundance was visually suggested by the loaves and fish. There wasn’t enough bread, but there was enough substance, for the whole of God-substance is present in its entirety at every point in space.

Here is the secret of the therapy of thankfulness. When we are grateful, we are great. When we become lax in the expression of gratitude, we become little people with little minds, leading little inconsequential lives.

Today I want to end the sermon in a little different way and to do so I need your help.

Take a moment right now to engage in the experience of gratitude. Close your eyes and simply feel grateful. Don’t turn outward, casting about for things to give thanks for. Resist the temptation to indulge in such thoughts as, “I would be grateful if I received that promotion and raise in salary.”

Simply experience thankfulness. Let the spirit of gratefulness flood your whole being with its healing warmth.

According to the principles which Jesus taught and lived, as you experience thankfulness, you release a vital energy and you open yourself so that everything begins to work in your life in an orderly and creative way.

As you leave this place today, as much as possible, keep your life centered in thanksgiving, and let that God-given energy fill your life. Amen.