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Daniel 6; Matthew 5:3-11  
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### A Grateful Society<sup>1</sup>

Heirarchical societies have always struggled with obligatory reciprocity. In other words, I scratch your back, you scratch mine. In these instances, gratitude becomes more a transaction and less a natural response to gifts of grace. And when power is at play, it becomes even more corrupt. You do these favors for me, and in return I'll give you what you need...obedience, loyalty, or a paycheck.<sup>2</sup> We've seen this miss use of power through the recent college admission scandals, Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse cases, or the ongoing saga of inappropriate governmental kickbacks.

This exploitation of power is never ok whether its in the government, in our work places, or in the Church.

Diana Butler Bass in *Grateful, The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* described this sort of power play between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennett in Jane Austin's novel *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>3</sup> Lady Catherine served as benefactor to Elizabeth's family by taking her into her home. All is well until Elizabeth is courted by Lady Catherine's nephew, Mr. Darcy. That didn't fly with Lady Catherine...because mixing inferior status with nobility would be a disgrace toward all that Lady Catherine had done for Elizabeth and her family.

In Jesus' day, the Roman Emperor was the great benefactor who's job was to provide peace, culture, and civility for his people. In return the people at the bottom were expected to provide the taxes to fund those benefits. The only problem was that that people at every level in between siphoned off most of the benefits for themselves. By the time anything reached the bottom rung of society, it was paltry and thinly distributed."<sup>4</sup>

"Obligatory reciprocity was the fabric of society. Gratitude was not a feeling. It was a political requirement."<sup>5</sup> Apparently not much has changed over the past two thousand years. Has it?

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<sup>1</sup> This series is largely influenced by two books, Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018) and Janice Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries: How a Year Looking on the Bright Side Can Transform Your Life* (NY: Penguin Random House Publishers, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 151

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

Our scripture takes us first to the Old Testament Book of Daniel 6:1-28 as we consider the marks of an ungrateful society and then to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which paints a much different view of gratitude.

To lay a little background, Daniel was one of Judah's brightest and most promising young men who was exiled in Babylon. Despite a lot of pressure to conform to the pagan culture around him, Daniel stayed true to himself and his God. And God granted him favor with the king and everyone in all of Babylon... well nearly everyone.

Would you join me as we hear how this story unfolds?

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I picked this story in Daniel because it seems to have so many parallels to our country today as we clearly struggle to be a more grateful society. But it also gives us the hope that one person can indeed have an impact on that society to bring about incredible change. So first we let's look at the marks of ungrateful Babylon in Daniel's day. And then let's see how Jesus paints a much different picture of what a grateful society should look like.

In an ungrateful society, notice that there is posturing, jealousy, and covetousness. We see how the king's other two administrators and 120 satraps were jealous of the favor the king showed to Daniel. Clearly they were not satisfied with the positions of power and influence they had before the king. They wanted more.

Diana Butler Bass quotes Mary Jo Leddy, "If we tend to imagine power as a pie, either very big or very little, then we tend to think in terms of some having more and others less. One person's gain is another's loss. Where dissatisfaction reigns supreme, as it does in our culture, then the scene is set for a conflict over the pie. Only the whole pie will suffice; nothing else will satisfy."<sup>6</sup> And as I mentioned last week, "the kinds of celebrations that result from 'pie grabbing' breed resentment, the exact opposite of communal gratitude."<sup>7</sup>

Our governmental leaders are losing this fight right now. Republican and Democrat. Every day the newspapers report one battle after another with very little willingness to reach across the isles to work on very complex issues facing our nation and the world. Jesus said, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."<sup>8</sup> My friends, if we truly love our country, then we must take these words to heart and begin to listen with humility to even our opponent's differing perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Jo Leddy quoted in Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 3:25

The next thing we see is how corruption, deceit, and distrust plagued the king's court. Notice how the administrators and satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel. But when they were unable to find anything wrong in him, they turned to fabricating stories, spreading lies, and developing false policies. They even went against their call to "ensure that the king might not suffer loss" by setting the king up for failure and manipulating him to publish a bogus decree that turned him against his most trusted advisor.

This seems to happen on a daily basis in Washington D.C. I don't know how anyone could trust anyone in this kind of political climate.

But this display of ingratitude that is plaguing our country is not just poor politics it is a display of our evil hearts.

Jesus in confronting the vileness of the Pharisees said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of the good stored up in them, and the evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in them. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."<sup>9</sup>

Posturing, jealousy, covetousness, corruption, deceit, and distrust...OH MY! All markers of ingratitude present in our society today. Even in the pagan Graeco-Roman world, "Ingratitude was 'the cardinal social and political sin.'"<sup>10</sup>

Ok let's take a break and come up for air because Jesus doesn't want us to end with such despair. No! He offers us new life. Something so much more than what we have now.

Take the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount for example. Jesus reminds us that the social hierarchy of a more grateful society is turned upside down in God's economy. Those who are typically empty handed are blessed and grateful for what they have.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 12:33-37

<sup>10</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 145.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to what we just heard, a more grateful society is one that offers hope to its people. Hope that God is not done with us yet, but is indeed working behind the scenes to strengthen our faith, to make us more humble, to show mercy to others, to purify our hearts and our words, to be a people of peace, and to stand up for what is right even if it means losing our lives.

The Apostle Paul continued in this vein as God worked to heal a divided church in Philippi, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as the Christ Jesus...who humbled himself, took on the nature of a servant, and sacrificed his very life for us.”<sup>12</sup>

A more grateful society looks out for the needs of others especially the most vulnerable in our midst. James, the Lord’s brother, said, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”<sup>13</sup>

A more grateful society has a servant leadership mentality in the same way that our session elders are here to serve us so that we can become all that God intended for us to become.

The Book of Acts painted a picture of the early church as a truly grateful society in this way. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions were their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them. There were no needy persons among them. From time to time those who had lands and houses sold them,

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:3-12

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:1-8

<sup>13</sup> James 1:27

brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet and it was distributed to anyone as they had need.”<sup>14</sup>

What a beautiful picture of a more grateful society that looks after and cares for one another. One that is generous. One that has time in their schedules for other people. One that is generous with its words toward others and praises the work of other people. One that has margin built into its resources in order to share God’s blessings with others.

One that is loving, kind, patient. One that does not envy, does not boast, and is not proud. One that is not rude, self-seeking, or easily angered. One that keeps not records of wrongs. Not that does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

My friends a more grateful society always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Because in this kind of society, love never fails.<sup>15</sup>

I’ll close this morning with Diana Butler Bass’ lovely summary conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice*.

“Elizabeth and Darcy marry, and together they create a new world at Darcy’s house, Pemberly - a grand place that is both private home and public estate - through practices of humility, equality, and hospitality. At Pemberly, gratitude fosters reconciliation. By novel’s end, family members, friends, and even foes (with the exception of one) are welcomed to Pemberly without threat of punishment or being subject to the demands of privilege...A different world of gratitude is possible. A great house is open to all - its gifts of abundance can heal and restore hope and love. Everyone is blessed” [as each takes their place at the table.]<sup>16</sup>

That is the kind of society I want to be part of and that we are each being invited by the Spirit of Jesus Christ to create among us.

In this upcoming election season, may we each exercise our freedom of conscious to vote in such a way that God’s kingdom comes to earth for all people as it is in heaven. May we leave behind the evil divided ways of our past, and move on to a bright new future together.

Where “the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 2:44-45

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

<sup>16</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 153-154.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 11:6-8

Where “justice rolls on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream.”<sup>18</sup>

Where “We will neither harm nor destroy on God’s holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>19</sup>

And may the Spirit of the Lord accomplish this in Jesus’ name.

Amen!

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<sup>18</sup> Amos 5:24

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 11:9

## Daniel 6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**6** It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, **2** and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss. **3** Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. **4** So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. **5** The men said, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”

**6** So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever! **7** All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. **8** Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.” **9** Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

### Daniel in the Lions’ Den

**10** Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. **11** The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. **12** Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, “O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?” The king answered, “The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.” **13** Then they responded to the king, “Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.”

**14** When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. **15** Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.”

**16** Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!” **17** A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. **18** Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

Daniel Saved from the Lions

**19** Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. **20** When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?” **21** Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! **22** My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.” **23** Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. **24** The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

**25** Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: “May you have abundant prosperity! **26** I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel:

For he is the living God,  
enduring forever.

His kingdom shall never be destroyed,  
and his dominion has no end.

**27**

He delivers and rescues,  
he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth;  
for he has saved Daniel  
from the power of the lions.”

**28** So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.