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2 Samuel 6:1-22
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Habits of Gratitude¹

I love it when people share how a sermon resonated with something they have experienced or read. Recently, Erin Suttan gave with me an excerpt from her friend's book that is about to be published, *Beginner's Pluck, Build Your Life of Purpose and Impact Now*. In the book, Liz Forkin Bohannon tells her story about arriving in London with her husband and young baby to begin a new opportunity. And being in London, they were excited to have their first evening away without their child since the baby was born.

She researched plays. She found romantic restaurants. She discovered an incredible Airbnb. Everything was set. She was so looking forward to this time alone with her husband.

When it came time to leave, their baby was really struggling to adjust to the time changes. One of them would have to stay behind. Liz watched in great disappointment as her romantic expectations disintegrated before her eyes. Ever experienced that before?

Knowing how much Liz wanted to see a London production, her husband sent her off to enjoy the show alone. Liz went begrudgingly still with two tickets in hand.

On her way, she made a pact with herself, that she would not let the day's events ruin her evening. What she needed was a change in perspective. She needed to reframe. So she decided instead to look for God's hidden miracle in the disappointment.

She came across a street performer who sang and played their instrument so beautifully that it captured her attention. She stopped and listen to him play for a moment. When he finished, she asked him about his story...how had he come to London.

The young man was from South Korea and had just arrived that day. Despite his family's objections, he left home to pursue his dream of being a great musician.

Suddenly, she had an idea. What if he was God's hidden miracle for the evening? What if the second ticket was really meant for him? So she invited him to join her at the play. And they went.

¹ 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).

Liz remarked that he had never been to the theater before and the experience was so overwhelmingly emotional. He was so grateful to Liz for her generosity and kindness. He confessed that he was beginning to second guess his decisions to come to London and this experience confirmed that he was where he needed to be.

A terrible evening turned into a hidden miracle.

It's all a matter of perspective.

You see there are two ways Liz could have looked at the situation. One was from a view of scarcity. In other words, the evening wouldn't match up to any expectations so why bother. This is not what I planned. An attitude of scarcity only leads us to be grumpy, ungrateful, selfish, and stingy.

Or there was the attitude of gratitude. Wow, I get to see a play in London. I am deeply grateful for the means to purchase two theater tickets and though it may not be as I hoped, there just might be a miracle in this if I look for it. This is exactly as God would have it. This attitude of gratitude leads us to praise God, to think of others, and to be generous with the gifts that God has given to us.

Our scripture takes us back to the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel where we hear a similar tale of two people who have two different perspectives.

To give a little background on our story. King Saul and his son Jonathan were just killed in battle. So David took over as King of Judah and Israel, capturing Jerusalem and assuming responsibility for Saul's household including his daughter, Michal.

Sometime before all this, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant from Israel but great misfortune had befallen them on account of it. So they gave it back to the Israelites. King David is returning the ark to Jerusalem with great rejoicing. But Michal refuses to join in David's joy.

David and Michal look at the same situation but with different lenses. David looks through the lens of gratitude and praise for being part of something extraordinary.

Michal, Saul's daughter, looks through the lens of scarcity and jealousy.

As a result, David was part of what God was doing while Michal missed out.

It's all a matter of perspective.

Join me as we read this story in 2 Samuel 6:1-22.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

David is rejoicing in what God had done by defeating his enemies, anointing him as king over two kingdoms, and bringing back the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful home. David is dancing. David is being generous with the people. He is unconcerned about how his actions might look to others.

Michal, however, is watching all this unfold from afar. Now remember, she is probably still quite sad that her father and brother were recently killed in battle.

Perhaps she is lamenting that it should have been them who were rejoicing and celebrating that day. But as it was, life took a radical turn from what she had hoped and now she greatly despised David for his good fortune.

Last week I talked about our emotions and how they can sometimes hinder our ability to be grateful. If we give Michal the benefit of the doubt, she has a right to be sad. She is still clearly in mourning. But I think with her story, there is more than that. She felt entitled to her royal life as the king's daughter. She was wanting something she couldn't have. And it spoiled her ability to be grateful for what she did have.

Greek Philosopher Epicurus about 340 BC wrote, "Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not. Remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for."

Third century philosopher Doigenese said, "He who is not satisfied with a little is satisfied with nothing."

This leads me to question, what can we learn from David and Michal and is there a way to cultivate a heart of gratitude? If gratitude is an emotion, or something we feel, is it possible to put practices into place that may change our perspective from one of scarcity to one of gratefulness? Are there certain habits of gratitude that we could try?

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."² This tells us that we should have reason to be thankful regardless of how we are feeling, even if we are grieving.

I mentioned last week that I was struggling to feel grateful because of the recent losses in my life. Looking at those losses from a lens of scarcity tells me that the days we had with them were not enough. We deserved better. You see its very self centered. As if we are the ones who should determine our days.

Scripture, however, encourages us to look at those losses very differently. We say, "Wow. We were so blessed with the days that we had and I am grateful for such great memories we did share."

The former view feeds a dissatisfied self centered soul. The other, though still sad, feeds an attitude of gratitude to God.

So yes, gratitude is an emotion, something that we feel. But it is also an ethic, something that we can do.

There are techniques that we can try. Practices that we can put into place that will feed our gratitude. And as we do those practices over a period of time...and research tells us that it takes on average sixty six days for new practices to stick before they become habits.

² 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Diana Butler Bass in her book on gratitude suggests some of the following ideas.

You can keep a gratitude diary. This is something I've actually started doing. I got a journal and each day when I wake up, I write down at least three things for which I am grateful. It's amazing as I open my eyes and look around, there is so for which I am blessed. It is interesting how writing down just one item of gratefulness usually triggers a whole host of other things that I see.

Karen created a gratitude board which is chalk board with erase markers that is located at the bottom of our steps. Anyone can write or draw what they are grateful for so we when we walk down the stairs each morning to start our day, we can be reminded that God has blessed us tremendously. We just need to open our eyes and begin to be aware of all the miracles that are all around us.

Another idea is you can write thank you notes which is a long lost art. There is some thing about putting words onto paper and sending them in the mail. There is no instantaneous gratification as there is with email or text messaging. But it's almost as if the words of appreciation germinate as they go through the mail, so that the recipient receives them at just the right time.

From what I hear, the best of leaders write more thank you notes than what they receive.

You can meditate or set aside time in your day to simply reflect upon the goodness of your life.

You can pray with gratitude beads, kind of using a rosary.

You can create certain rituals of thanksgiving.

You can do good things for others in need.

You can take pictures throughout the day of things that you are grateful such as items of beauty that spark your wonder and awe.

You can set cues or times during the day to express gratitude. When you first wake up before jumping out of bed. You can say a quick prayer "Thank you God for a restful night of sleep and for waking me up today." There are mealtimes. And then there is going to bed.

St. Ignatius devolved what is known as a Prayer of Examen for the end of the day that involves five simple steps. Become aware of God's presence. Review the day with gratitude. Pay attention to your emotions. Choose one feature for the day and pray from it. And look forward to tomorrow. It's not hard and doesn't take long, but it marks the day with a grateful heart.³

This is not an exhaustive list, but they can be starts to developing a habit of expressing gratitude. When you look for things to be grateful, you find them. Once you start looking for them, you realize that gratitude begets more gratitude.

³ Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 79.

Author Melodie Beattie wrote, “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life...It makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”⁴

In 1998, I was working as a technical director for a nonprofit agency that aimed to help industry produce less pollution. Great cause. It paid well and was located in a cool spot in downtown Seattle. But didn’t engage my heart. Taking my high school kids from our church on a backpacking trip along the Washington Coast really caught my attention. But researching chemical free additives to adhesives...not so much.

My executive director knew it. So she fired me, just three weeks before Maddy was born.

At the time, it really hurt and was a real blow to my ego.

And yet as I look back to that season, I am grateful that my boss did the hard work of freeing me up to do what my heart does best. It got me out of a career that I despised and opened the door for me to step into ministry.

And through that year, Karen and I learned to trust God to provide for us and to be grateful for every little gift that came from above.

I can honestly say that I wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t fired.

Thank to my executive director!

Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Maya Angelou said, “If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do is be present in the present...gratefully.”⁵

Going back to our scripture story, notice what happens to Michal when she is not grateful for the gifts that God had given to her. She stayed away from the celebrations. Isolated herself from others. She cultivated a critical heart and thought only of herself. She was not generous towards others.

On the contrary, notice what happens when David is grateful for the gifts that God had given to him. Not only does he publicly express his gratitude in ways that he was not ashamed to display, but he was generous. He thought of others and how he could share his blessings with them. He blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty. And he gave generous gifts of bread, cakes of raisins and dates to all the people, men and women, who could continue the celebrations in their own homes.

⁴ Melodie Beattie quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (NY: HarperCollings Publishers, 2018), 49.

⁵ Maya Angelou quoted in Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 67.

And so it is with us. As we put some new techniques in place for us to practice gratitude, over time they will become habits. And those habits will change who we are and how we approach the world around us.

So may we choose gratitude for even the smallest things in life. May we see things from a half full perspective. And may we be overflowing with thanksgiving and praise that we may be generous with the many gifts that God has given to us. Amen!