



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

“A Recipe for Gratitude”

Psalm 8

Two men were hiking in the mountains and unfortunately found themselves between a brown bear and her cub. I believe it is no longer politically correct to call a brown bear a grizzly bear, but this bear looked grizzled. Horrified, the two darted toward their truck. The drooling bear followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they would not make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, “Put up a prayer, John! We’re in for it!”

John answered, “I can’t. I’ve never made a public prayer in my life.”

His companion implored, “But you must! The bear is catching us.”

John panted, “All right, I’ll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: ‘O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.’”

A theological and philosophical question that I am at times faced with is, as a child of God who believes in the absolute sovereignty of God, am I supposed to give thanks when someone or something has had or about to have me for lunch? Maybe not literally, but there are those who would do us harm.

We read in First Thessalonians 5:18, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Well, to be perfectly honest, I’m not convinced that Paul would be telling me to give thanks to God for the privilege of becoming a meal for a grizzly bear. But I believe I should give thanks to God in all circumstances, not because of my situation, but because in all circumstances God is in ultimate control. I may become bear food, but I still belong to God and look forward to eternal life in God’s kingdom.

Speaking of lunch, I want to take some time this morning to share with you a recipe. It's a recipe for thanksgiving or gratitude. It is a very precise recipe that calls for the best ingredients. You cannot make this with inferior brands or take any short cuts.

I remember when Sally's father use to make pancakes for the family. He would not measure any of the ingredients. He would put into a bowl a couple of scoops of flour, then shake in a little salt. Picking up the baking powder, he would hit the tin on the top of the bowl until he felt the right amount had fallen. After mixing the dry ingredients he would break a couple of eggs, pour a little oil from the bottle, and then add milk until he had just the right consistency. I promise you he made the worst pancakes ever. I'm not sure he even liked them for he would take these pancakes and top these bricks with about three tablespoons of butter, then cover them in about a half inch of syrup.

The recipe for gratefulness calls for specific ingredients, and I will focus on two this morning, two ingredients or virtues that are critical to any recipe for gratefulness. It is most unfortunate that these virtues have lost their meaning over time but reclaiming them makes all the difference in the world when one is cultivating an attitude of gratefulness in their lives. The two concepts or words I want to focus on this morning as we consider gratitude or thanksgiving are wonder and leisure.

I know that caught your attention, for these two words were far from your mind as you were trying to think of the two ingredients I would list for gratitude. The reason for this is that over time words take a beating. By now most of you know that the word I am most concerned about is the word "awesome."

Awesome is a word that describes a particular attribute of God Almighty. It can also describe the majestic wonders God accomplishes in creation or even in our lives. But the word has taken a beating. It is a word I hear in the most frivolous ways. I was at a youth event where a lot of trash

was accumulating. So I offered to take out the trash and the kid who was in charge said, "That would be awesome." Well, I'm not real sure what is so awesome about taking out the trash, but it made me feel real important as I did this favor.

What was once a word rich in meaning, through misuse and overuse, is reduced to a cliché, and the word "awesome" has lost its potency. It reminds me of what we have done to potatoes. Consider the potato. It's a healthy food. Potatoes are rich in nutrients and if eaten in moderation can contribute to a healthy diet. However, with the rise of fast food, we've taken this good source of nutrition and stripped it of its health and substance, deep fried it, loaded it with salt and presto -- you have what? French fries.

This is what we have done with many of the words in our language. We've stripped them of their substance and nutrients, deep-fried them, put too much salt on them, and what are we left with? A word void of the substance and meaning once associated with it. This morning I want to recapture some of the potency of two words, because they are essential ingredients in the recipe of gratefulness.

The first word or ingredient is "wonder." We live in a day when we must have everything explained, and yes, we have explanations for most everything. We explain the weather, happenings in nature, the working of our bodies. You name it -- someone has explained it. This is certainly not bad in and of itself. Our knowledge has made us safer, easier and healthier. But in our explanations we seem to have lost our sense of wonder.

Maybe someone could explain to Jon Daniels the general manager of the Texas Rangers what he can do to get the Rangers back into their rightful place in the baseball playoffs next year.

I'm sure somebody can explain to me how my cell phone works. I'm sure someone can explain to me how I drive around town with my cell phone and my mother can call my cell phone number and of all the millions of cell

phone calls taking place at that moment, the right signal can reach my phone two hundred miles away.

But it is even more amazing when I look at my hands, and when my mind wants my left index finger to move it moves. I wonder, am awed by the fact that when my eyes are opened, I can see what is in front of me. I can see your faces. My brain is encased within what some call a thick skull. It is never exposed to light, yet it detects the light in this room and I see.

You may be thinking at this moment that, "Steve needs a vacation; he has really lost it this time." Or maybe we've explained away how things work so much so that we're no longer taken by the wonder of it all -- the wonder of something as simple yet magnificent as making the index finger on my left hand move.

Dave Fleming wrote, "Wonder is an invitation to mystery rather than to a sterile explanation of happenings. And it's essential to the meal of gratefulness. The ancients were more connected to mystery and wonder because they lived in a world void of many of our explanations. We might look back at their primitive ideas and laugh. But one thing they experienced more readily was a sense of wonder and awe.

It was with a deep sense of wonder that David wrote the eighth Psalm. And I invite you to know David's wonder as I read Psalm 8 from the New Living Translation:

O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!

Your glory is higher than the heavens.

You have taught children and nursing infants to give you praise.

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers --

the moon and the stars you have set in place --

what are mortals that you should think of us,

**mere humans that you should care for us?
For you made us only a little lower than God,
and you crowned us with glory and honor.
You put us in charge of everything you made,
giving us authority over all things--
the sheep and the cattle and all the wild animals
the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
and everything that swims the ocean currents.
O Lord, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!**

This Psalm expresses the wonder in David's heart. He was overtaken by the "awesome" power of creation, not the type of "awesome" used when I took out the trash at a youth event, but the "awesome" like it should be used. David was filled with wonder at the amazing grace of his creator. And all he could do was wonder at these attributes of God. Look at his questions: What are mortals that you should think of us? Why are you so concerned about such a small part of creation? David did not get an answer, but rather than seeking an explanation he was led to wonder. David was not seeking theological answers, as we tend to do in our world of explanations, but rather he was simply in awe of the realities that the Sovereign of the Universe would care so deeply about us. His questions were turned into praise, and this wonder becomes the first ingredient in gratefulness.

If you want to have a clearer picture of this wonder look at our children. What did the Psalm say? "You have taught children and nursing infants to give you praise." Or the more traditional wording from the RSV, "Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants."

Children take a wonderful delight in the simple things. They don't understand, but they enjoy life in a way we wish we could again.

Have you ever gone bowling? Have you ever gone bowling with five pre-school boys? Let me tell you that if you have never taken five pre-school boys bowling you are missing out on one of the wonders of life.

When you bowl with pre-schoolers, the first thing you ask for are those bumper pads that fill in the gutters of the lane from one end to the other. Well, these five boys and I got our lane with the bumper pads, we were given these bright yellow balls which weigh about five pounds, then I sat back and watched a marvel.

All five of the children went to the line, put the ball between their legs and shoved it with all their might and stand to watch their ball roll at the lightning speed of .5 miles per hour, taking almost 30 seconds to get to the pins, bouncing off the bumper pads in the gutters at least three times. There were several times when the ball actually got stuck in the pad, for when a ball runs out of energy it stops.

As the ball that made its journey down the lane, whoever was bowling would be jumping up and down with the anticipation of how many of the pins would fall, and no matter how many fell they were delighted. No one kept score. No one cared who was in the lead. They just could not wait until their turn to bowl. If you have never bowled with five pre-school boys you have missed out on one of the greatest joys in life. May God give us the grace to love the simple things as children do and give God praise. And the first and main ingredient to gratitude is to praise God for the wonders of His creation and the wonder of His grace.

The second ingredient is leisure, which is another word like awesome and wonder that has lost its meaning. How do you define "leisure"? My guess most of us would define leisure as a time when we can get away from the demands of everyday work and enjoy some rest, relaxation and fun.

Webster defines leisure as freedom from hurry. This is getting closer. But one ancient Chinese definition gives us the understanding of leisure I am talking about. Leisure is the space of time in which we let the sun shine. You see leisure is more than free time, or time away from hurry, but there is also a quality to leisure. It's not wasted time, it's not lying on the couch watching football, and it's not rocking in the hammock sipping iced tea. But it's the moment of enjoying the simple things.

For instance, we might say we're going to take a leisurely stroll, or we had a leisurely dinner with friends. It is not the stroll or the dinner that is leisurely, but the quality of this time spent with a spouse or with a friend. It's a time to enjoy the simple things. It's not necessarily the slowness of the walk as it is enjoying the wind blowing, watching the red, brown, yellow and golden leaves of fall, seeing the beauty that is all around with some you care deeply about. That's leisure. A leisurely dinner with friends allows for time to enjoy the company of friends, to laugh together, to have time to appreciate each other. That's leisure. It's not unhurried time; it's quality time for the soul. In God's grace bowling with five pre-school children can be leisure. It can be a headache, it could cause an ulcer, but by God's grace seeing the smiles, the enthusiasm, the simple joy on the faces of these children turns this time into leisure.

David understood leisure even at work. As a shepherd out in the field taking care of his sheep he looked up to heaven and later wrote, **"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers -- the moon and the stars you have set in place -- what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us?"**

Leisure is sensitivity and an awareness that occurs in a given moment, more than what's visible to the unhurried and the hurried. It's what allowed Jesus to take ordinary things from everyday life and turn them into extraordinary examples of eternal life. In fact, this may be the best way to think about leisure. It's a quality of time and space that opens us to eternity in

the moment. It's the smile on a child's face, the wind on our own. It's time with friends; it's understanding God grace in the ordinary.

Maybe the best way to define leisure is to say it is living in the moment rather than for the moment. To live for the moment is to plan a trip to the bowling alley and then get through the experience with your sanity. To live in the moment, once again, is to see the smiles. Living for the moment creates selfishness. Whereas, living in the moment fuels gratefulness.

Gratefulness is a mixture of wonder and leisure. For wonder awakens us to a God that's so beyond us. Who according to Psalm 8, "His glory is higher than the heavens." Yet God is closer than our very breath. "For you made us only a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor." And leisure allows us to enjoy the wonder of God in the fullness of any given moment.

To me this is the basis for Thanksgiving. It is the recipe for gratitude. Our shorter catechism puts it so well. We are to "glorify God and enjoy him forever." The wonder of God tells us of God's glory, and our enjoyment of God and God's gifts is what leisure is all about. And for this I give thanks.