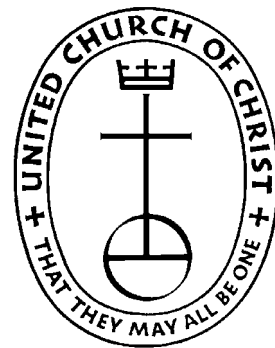


Lessons in Gratitude – and Getting the Bonus Miles as Well

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
November 22, 2009



This sermon discusses how gratitude is an attitude we can choose to have, a way to look at our lives and the world we can decide to adopt. Rejoicing in the present moment leads us into hope.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
November 15, 2009 (#1382)
Reading: Selections from II Chronicles 16 & Nehemiah 11-12

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

Lessons in Gratitude – and Getting the Bonus Miles As Well

The biblical storytellers tell of Moses leading a group of Semitic people out of bondage in Egypt. After a time wandering in the desert, they united with another group, Jethro's people and formed a covenant with a God they called Yahweh. They followed that God into the land of Canaan.

They didn't build a temple for Yahweh. Instead a portable Ark held the covenant. They envisioned God tenting in that Ark and moving with them. They probably lived in independent villages and city states with no single ruler. Yahweh was their ruler who would lift up a special person to lead in times of crisis.

But that didn't work very well. The people grumbled – we need a ruler and an army to defend ourselves. So Saul was anointed the first king, and after a turbulent reign he was succeeded by David. David established a new city from which he would rule, Jerusalem, and wanted a temple for Yahweh.

The book of Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible says David and the people from the tribe of Levi carried the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem; David dancing before it with joy. The Ark was placed inside a tent until a temple could be built and offerings were made to Yahweh. Then David appointed certain Levites to “minister before the Ark of Our God, to celebrate and give thanks and praise to the Most High.”

So David, entering this new city, immediately appointed people to be in charge of continually giving thanks. David even composed a hymn of thanksgiving himself: Give thanks to our God, and call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the nations. Sing to God, sing praise.”

The storytellers told of good times and bad over the next few centuries, good rulers and bad rulers. But ultimately the army of Babylon invaded Jerusalem and destroyed Yahweh's temple, and most Hebrews were taken away into captivity.

But eventually things changed. When the Persians conquered the Babylonians, Hebrews who wished to do so could return to their homeland. The book of Nehemiah talks about that return indicating that immediately people wanted to rebuild the temple. And one of the first things needed was the appointment of certain people to be responsible for expressing thanks to God – Mattaniah would lead prayers of thanksgiving.

ing. The Levites gathered to “celebrate the dedication (of the wall) with joyful songs of thanksgiving.”

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible says, “No motif more adequately reveals the nature of biblical faith than does gratitude or thanksgiving.”

So drawing near to our national day of thanksgiving, it seems appropriate to remember the role of gratitude in our faith.

Let me tell you about Scott Campbell’s recent experience. He is the minister at Harvard-Epworth United Methodist Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In January, Campbell’s denomination launched a fitness plan for those in their health insurance program. Each participant was to set a walking goal and was given a pedometer. By achieving a certain number of steps each week, people could win gift cards or even cash.

Campbell felt this was great. He would be rewarded financially for much-needed exercise. Soon he was obsessed with walking everywhere. Several times he went over 20,000 steps in a day – more than 9 miles. And most days he did at least 12,000 steps – 6 miles.

One Tuesday in February he woke up tired, achy and congested. So he decided to stay home that day. But there was a complication. This was American Heart Month. The insurance company offered 250 bonus miles for people who walk at least 7,000 steps each weekday of the week before Valentine’s Day.

Monday he had already walked twice that – 15,000 steps. On Tuesday, feeling miserable, against the advice of his spouse, he still managed 8,000 steps – he wanted that bonus. Wednesday he felt better and worked half a day and got his steps in. Thursday he was back to his regular routine with 9,000 steps. One day to go. He came home Thursday tired. He laid down, suddenly shivering. By 11:00 that night, he had a 103° temperature and headed to the emergency room.

He had an elevated pulse, a decreased oxygen saturation level and pneumonia. He was admitted to a hospital for the first time in his life. And what was his primary concern? How could he get in the requisite 7,000 steps the next day to qualify for his bonus health miles. He said his wife was “remarkably unsympathetic to that particular concern.”

He went on to describe the hospital experience – lots of people helping him in many different ways. It was clearly a place of healing, where the staff tenderly cared for

patients.

He said he realized that if this illness had come along a few generations ago, his life would have been in danger. The antibiotic effective against his illness hadn't been discovered back then. He also realized people in other places in the world, without adequate medical care, still die from pneumonia. Or without good medical insurance, he might have resisted going to the ER and put himself at greater risk.

So he said: "Despite my complaints about the experience, I am deeply grateful for the opportunities for healing that were offered to me, and I am more determined than ever to work for better healthcare for all persons, at home and abroad."

They sent him home on Sunday and he was surprised at how shaky he felt; he had to pause going up the four front stairs. He thought of his parents, in their eighties, who have to cling to the porch railing to get up those stairs. He watched an NBA game that night and marveled at what professional athletes do with their bodies. He had a whole new appreciation for the simple gift of health.

Thinking back over that week, he was grateful for several gifts, not the least of which was humility. He had been reminded that he cannot count forever on his own strength. He was helped by many people throughout the course of that hospitalization – doctors, nurses, his spouse, friends, colleagues. He had to admit he needed that help. He wrote, "It's not such a bad thing to be reminded of our dependence on others."

That article in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* that said "no motif more adequately reveals the nature of biblical faith than does gratitude" also said, in the biblical narratives gratitude "occurs only within the context of covenant relationship." So gratitude is about being thankful for the relationships in which we are nurtured and sustained.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: "I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching a boy and girl playing in the sand. They were building an elaborate sand castle with gates, towers and moats. Just as they finished, a big wave knocked it down, reducing it to heap of wet sand."

He said, "I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to their hard work. But they surprised me. They ran up the shore, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized," the rabbi said, "that ... all the things in our lives ... we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, a wave (may) knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has

somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh."

So Scott Campbell's gratitude was for all the people who helped him through his medical crisis.

He said he was also grateful for being reminded that healing is always a real possibility. And I think that's true in terms of mind and spirit as well as body. We can get better. Ask those whose lives have been turned around by Twelve Step programs; ask those who have had therapists help them renew their lives. Campbell said: "We can overcome threats and challenges to our health and return to full strength. I know this is not the case," he said, "for every person or with every illness. Sometimes there are conditions that we cannot overcome. Sometimes people die. But most of the time if we get the help we need and cooperate in the way we ought to, we can get better. That is an amazing gift, and one that we ought not take lightly."

I think attitude is a vital part of being thankful. Gratitude is about the way we view and live life. Suzie Bjork, the new Associate Minister at the Bayshore UCC church in Long Beach, wrote a newsletter article this week about traveling with her husband to Florida for his brother's wedding. Landing in Tampa, they drove to Ft. Lauderdale through the Big Cypress National Preserve known as "alligator alley."

She really wanted to see alligators, but didn't seem to be having much luck at it. Then she wrote, "I looked back into the swamp and saw one. It turns out that I didn't know what I was looking for. They were darker in appearance than I thought they'd be against the light colored swamp grasses and they looked smaller than I thought they would be from our distance." Suddenly, with those realizations she began to see dozens and dozens of them. She said, "You know, sometimes it takes a change of scenery or looking at something from a different vantage point to appreciate the beauty of God's creation and God's presence in the moment."

Well, I think gratitude is about that same kind of shift in the way we see things. The Buddha said: "Let us rise and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful." It's an attitude, a way of seeing things.

Rabbi Kushner again: "Each night as I prepare for bed, I put drops in my eyes to fend off glaucoma that would rob me of my sight and take from me the pleasure of reading. Each morning at breakfast, I take a pill to control my blood pressure, and each evening I take another to control my cholesterol. But instead of lamenting the ailments that come with growing older, instead of wishing I was young and fit, I take my medi-

cine with a prayer of thanks that modern science has found ways to help me cope with those ailments. I think of all my ancestors who didn't live long enough to develop the complications of old age and did not have pills to take when they did."

So being grateful in life is largely a matter of attitude. It is something over which we have control. It is a choice.

Campbell said he also learned from his hospitalization that "the day is coming when this frail flesh will finally fail. ... yet we are given a remarkable opportunity to live lives of significance in the days we have together. We can live in ways that transcend the finitude of our existence and link us with what is forever."

Gratitude, thanksgiving is about an attitude that values all the moments of the present – an attitude neither mired in the past nor obsessively anxious about the future.

Again, wisdom from Rabbi Kushner, who wrote about the Jewish autumn festival of Sukkoth during which Jews build little huts made of boards and branches. Into those huts they invite family and friends to celebrate bonds of love and friendship. If you remember Rabbi Stephen Julius Stein who preached here last year, Kay and I were honored to be invited to join him and his partner, also named Stephen, in their Sukkoth hut one evening.

Kushner said: "Sukkoth celebrates the beauty of things that don't last, the little hut so vulnerable to wind and rain will be dismantled at week's end; the ripe fruits which spoil if not picked and eaten right away; the friends who may not be with us for as long as we would wish; the beauty of the leaves changing colors as they begin the process of dying and falling from the trees. Sukkoth tells us that the world is filled with good and beautiful things, food and wine, flowers and sunsets, and good company to share them with, but we have to enjoy them right away because they will not last. They will not wait for us to finish other things to get around to them."

Maybe this next week we should each make a real effort to express our gratitude for all that we have right now.

And I think gratitude leads us into hope. There is an indelible image in my mind of my experience last summer in the little Palestinian village of Bil'in – sitting with a family who knew Israeli soldiers would probably come back that evening, as they had the evening before, to harass, beat and arrest some of the village men and youth. This outspoken family with whom I was spending the night was likely to be a target. Yet the children were laughing, the adults telling stories. They cared about each other; they were thankful for family and for the close connections of the village. And that gratitude gave them hope

even as the Israeli helicopters circled above our heads.

So there are many dimensions to being a thankful people.

But I can't end this sermon without going back to Scott Campbell's health miles. What happened?

Well, Campbell wrote the people at Health Miles explaining that he had more than the 35,000 total steps he needed for that week before Valentine's Day. He had more than 40,000 in the four days before he went into the hospital. So could they do anything to help him get the bonus even though he didn't actually walk all five days?

Of course he knew what their answer would be – that the software was programmed in such a way that because he didn't actually walk the steps when he was supposed to, there was nothing they could do.

But he said that several days after he sent his letter, "I looked in my Health Miles account and for each of the five days that I was unable to walk, I was credited with 12,500 steps covering the missed bonus and then some. There was no explanation, no response to my email, just this unmerited gift."

He said, "The next time someone asks me to explain grace, I'll tell them it's a little bit like that."

May each of us seek to live this coming week with a little more gratitude, rejoicing in the present moment and in the unmerited gifts we too are apt to receive.