

# St James United Church

Message for October 13, 2024  
Thanksgiving Sunday



“The Gracious Way of Gratitude” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Joel 2:21-27; Mark 6:7-12; and Ann Lamott, *Thanks, Help, Wow: Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012) 56 and 58

I’m struggling this Thanksgiving. I’m struggling because of how lucky I feel in the midst of so much hurt in our world, be it so much loss and devastation in Gaza, the hostage families in Israel feeling their loved ones are forgotten, the escalation of the war into Lebanon, the war in Ukraine, in other places too, plus the Gulf coast of Florida hit by two hurricanes, people struggling in Georgia and North Carolina, the crisis in affordability, issues facing Indigenous communities..., and that’s just a slice of what’s going on for other humans, not factoring in the other than human. My heart breaks for everything that so many are facing, that I’m not facing, a reality for which I’m grateful. And this, of course, is where the struggle comes. How can I give thanks this year without also somehow feeling self-congratulatory?

The struggle I’m facing is what happens when we treat gratitude as a feeling, not a posture we hold in our lives. When gratitude is a feeling, it’s usually rooted in comparison. I feel grateful when I look at what others are facing, grateful I’m not in that situation. That makes my gratitude contingent. I feel grateful as long as things are OK as I define them, but when things go sideways... my confidence is lost. Then I struggle. I struggle because I’m attached to how I want things to be and not as they are. It’s a possessive gratitude, based on the past as I look to what I have had, and on the future as I hope to still have it, rather than grounded in the moment, in what’s present right now. True gratitude is an approach of openness to all that is, including to what I often take for granted, like being appreciative of the air in my lungs enabling me to live, let alone speak, appreciative of the warmth of this space, physically and emotionally in the connection we have with each other, appreciative of the food on the table in front of us, reminding me of the prospect of the supper I’ll share with Glen today, not as a future hope as much as in appreciation for the loving care we have right now even if a tragedy strikes.

That last appreciation reminds me that gratitude isn’t a contest. I can be grateful in the midst of loss, of adversity, and actually can be more resilient in those times, a posture of gratitude helping me maintain perspective as I focus on what is rather than just on what is not, as I remember that I am more than the last bad thing that happened. With a posture of gratitude I see that in the midst of hurt there are gifts, like the man in Florida who lost his home but rejoiced as a pet bird found its way to where he was. As I give thanks for something that in the moment brings me joy even in my sorrow, I open space to release my pain rather than hold on to it. As I focus on the people around me and show gratitude for their support, I stay connected rather than isolated. As I focus on the moment and on whatever is gift in it, say the taste of some mint tea, then focus on

the next moment, and on the next as well, then I remain oriented toward hope. When we look at our situation in this way, we get the restoration that Joel prophesied, renewal even in the midst of drought followed by locusts. It isn't contingent on literal rain, but on the softened heart made possible by gratitude.

This is the gratitude I need to cultivate this year, a gratitude we all can have wherever we are in the world, whether we are relatively OK or in the midst of crisis. It is focused on what we share rather than on what we don't, on what already connects us, not what's revealed when I compare myself to another. It's the gratitude Ann Lamott suggests flips a switch in us and turns on a desire to clean a mess that someone else made or be OK with the person who grabbed the last turkey, and so creates a graciousness between us that invites compassion and seeks community. The freedom it engenders may be a divine gift, but we can open ourselves to it as we intentionally pause each day to just be, to savour what is around us, to appreciate what is happening in our lives, to make a point of saying thank you to people, to the animals and plants, to God, and as we do, we become increasingly conscious of the gifts in our lives, in others' lives, all of us part of 1 community.

This is the heart of Jesus' instructions as he sent his disciples out to preach the gospel and invite repentance, a change of hearts and lives, a change that begins with his disciples. He told them to travel with little of their own, requiring in them a similar openness to what gratitude generates. It begins with them being open-handed as they travelled, not afraid to lose what they had. When "gratitude" is based on comparison, we end up clinging to what we have, and close ourselves to others out of fear. Travelling with so little also forced them to be open-hearted as they graciously accepted the hospitality of strangers, grateful for what people set before them. Their mission of preaching the gospel needed them to be open-handed and hearted, and in the process they lived the gospel as they fostered connections and nurtured community wherever they went.

And this living the gospel, open in gratitude, creates space for Joel's prophecy to be fulfilled not just for other humans but as we heard, for the soil, animals and plants. A posture of openness, of gracious receptivity to the gift of the moment helps us be more appreciative of what's right in front of us, perhaps a bird, or some mint, and so are more inclined to protect them and the rest of the world around us. Likewise, being grateful for what we have lessens the need to constantly acquire more. We become more inclined to reach out to others, and to share as we choose to connect and cooperate rather than to compare and compete. We start to wonder, do we all really need our own drill or lawnmower or snow-blower? As we realize the answer is no, we start to live more simply, share more, and thankfully as a result, we live more gently with the rest of creation.

This has been a challenging year in so many places, challenging here as well. Given this, we may feel resentful as we face a crisis, or feel discomfort, even guilt because we don't. Each of these feelings pulls us from others, but there is another way. Gratitude opens us up to what is in front of us, to gifts in our lives even in hard times, and connects us together in a spirit of cooperation and community. On this Thanksgiving, let's foster this way of graciousness and gratitude. Amen.