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4 Things that Matter Most: Gratitude  
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Last week we explored the **sacred phrase** "I Love You" and how **it connects us to the divine and to one another**. Today, we turn to another of life's most essential phrases: "Thank you."

These two simple words carry profound power—they shift our perspective **from scarcity to abundance, from isolation to community, from despair to hope**.

Dr. Ira Byock reminds us in his book "The Four Things That Matter Most" that although his wisdom comes from the end-of-life setting, these phrases—Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. And I love you—are not just for the dying. **They're for the living.**

Gratitude, in particular, is not meant to be a last-minute scramble. It's meant to **become the rhythm of our lives**—a daily practice that shapes **how we move through the world**.

**But** let's be honest about today's scripture from Thessalonians: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." *Really, Paul?* That sounds unrealistic, maybe impossible. It feels fake.

Because here's my real life: My two-year-old's sticky handprints are all over my couch. My older kid has left permanent marker stains on the table from their latest "masterpiece." *And that's just this morning.* I'll tell you, **gratitude is not always my default response**.

And that's just **the small stuff**. What about **the really hard stuff**? I don't know about you, but my life, at times, is hard, unfair, and downright obnoxious. I talked last week about my husband and I both losing our dads within four months of each other.

It was a brutal season—one where we were just trying to keep going, barely managing the basics. In moments like those, **this verse can feel not just hard—but offensive**.

Can't God handle **our anger and our ache** just as much as our gratitude?

When I hit a wall like that in Scripture, **I turn to curiosity**. What was Paul really saying?

Turns out, Paul wasn't writing to people living their best lives. **He was writing to a grieving community in Thessalonica**. They were wrestling with death, fear, uncertainty.

There is something about that truth that **allows me to lean in and open my heart to learn something** from these seemingly placid words "Give thanks in all circumstances."

These **weren't words for the comfortable**—they were **instructions for people in deep pain**. And that changes everything.

Paul isn't telling them—or us—to ignore the hard things. He's inviting them to **give thanks within the mess**. Not because everything's fine, but because

God is still present.  
Still faithful.  
Still showing up.

Let me tell you a story from just a few weeks ago.

Life—**and in particular the lawn**—had gotten away from us. My husband typically works long hours. School's out, so I'm the driver for theater camp, improv camp, and something called TimberNook...

As you know in June, I was juggling multiple jobs *and* our daycare provider was in China, so a teenager **was running a makeshift daycare at my house** for my son Charles and Pastor Susie's twins, Ruby and Finn. Things were (and honestly still are) **chaotic!**

The lawn, however, was so bad, our neighbors, who we didn't know very well, **did a welfare check**. They knocked one evening, half-laughing, asking if we were okay. I was working and my husband was home with Charles and they all **had a good laugh about the state of affairs both inside and outside my house**.

The neighbors graciously offered to help and my husband, who could not mow the lawn with the two-year-old in tow, **asked if maybe we could borrow** their more high-powered mower the next night to get through the overgrowth that our electric mower was struggling with. They happily agreed and went home.

Next thing he knew, **the neighbor was out mowing our lawn himself that very night!**

Are we still stressed and a little overwhelmed by life right now? Yes. But our lawn looks immensely better and *that particular stress* is gone for the moment.

Do I feel bad he mowed our whole lawn? Absolutely, **lots of shame happening** having someone else with our basic chores!

But I no longer have the shame of **how terrible my lawn looked** next to all my **retired neighbors** when I pull in the driveway at night.

Among all of those complicated feelings, I wondered - **was I experiencing gratitude?** And yes, **I was and still am experiencing deep appreciation.** I just had to wade through all the **competing emotions** to get there.

And **it was that gratitude** that nudged us to finally exchange numbers with the family as we had been meaning to do and make some summer plans together.

We were **vulnerable**—and it **expanded our community.**

That is the gift. **Again and again, it comes back to community.** God gives us the gift of community as a **balm for our suffering.** Our collective work together, in all its imperfection, is the Spirit of the Lord manifesting here on earth. Each can of food donated to the food shelf (**all the cereal brought this week!**), each dollar shared to help someone in the community, each lawn mowed!—this is the Spirit of

God made visible in our daily lives. **That is the gospel in action.**

We don't suffer alone, and we don't heal alone. We do it through the power of Christ—**together.**

One thing I've noticed over years of ministry, **having a front seat to many acts of generosity**, is this: most people **feel** grateful. But **many** struggle to **say** thank you. They are genuinely moved by acts of kindness—meals delivered, rides to appointments, financial help in times of need. But they get stuck on the "thank you" part, not because they're ungrateful—**but because receiving is hard**. Most of us would rather be the helper; the giver.

Just like I was pushing against having been helped with my yard work, it's common that we **don't want to feel like we're in someone's debt**.

Being on the receiving end is **humbling**. **Painful even** sometimes. And that emotion requires us to **set aside our pride** in order to **find and feel** our gratitude.

Diana Butler Bass puts it beautifully: "Gratitude is not about repayment of debts. It is about relationships." **Gratitude is not transactional—it's relational**. It's the thread that binds us to one another, over time, and across seasons of giving and receiving.

Gratitude transforms us from a "me" mindset to a "we" mindset. And a "we" mindset **aligns with Scripture's deepest calling**: to love others, seek justice, and work toward healthier communities.

Again from our book, Dr. Byock puts it this way: "In the act of saying thank you, **we expand ourselves**." It's a holy kind of generosity—to pause, to notice, to bless someone else by seeing the gift they've given.

When we thank someone, we invest **attention in what we have rather than what we lack**, even when we are receiving acts of kindness from others. We recognize **that we are part of something larger than ourselves**. That we are all **connected**.

The Dutch Priest, Henri Nouwen challenges us by saying: "To be grateful for the good things is easy. But to be grateful for **all of life**—the joy and the sorrow—that takes **spiritual work**."

This isn't about ignoring pain. It's about **trusting that God is present**, even there. When we say "thank you" for the whole of our story, we reclaim it as **sacred**.

What would change if we actually **sat in our moments of deep gratitude and vulnerability**—felt the discomfort, and the joy, of being deeply thankful? Especially when we're up against something big—like death. That's when life slows down and **gratitude becomes clear**.

This is not about toxic positivity or denying real life. This is about trusting that even in our darkest moments, we can find **the guiding hand of a loving God**. When we can say **thank you to all that has brought us** to this present moment, we claim the fullness of our being as a gift from God.

For both my husband and I, there was **unexpected and profound beauty** in the season of losing our dads. We—having each lost a father—**understood one another** in ways no words could express. Our relationship was **deepened** as we walked the path neither of us wanted.

And we were held so tenderly, **especially by this church community**. Through meals delivered. Countless prayers. And through a very complicated rotating schedule of people picking up my child from school when I was out of state caring for my dad.

And then—amid that grief—we **learned I was pregnant**. After years of infertility and loss, that baby, *that was to become Charles*, was **light in the darkness**. In having to hold two those bookends, of **both death and life**, I was confronted daily to **remain open** to goodness and hope.

It grounded me. It reminded me that **life continues**, even in the valley of the shadow.

In those days, in a very practical way, I had to care for my body—because of this growing new life within me. And **I could only do that** because of the **countless people** that were so diligently **caring for me**.

Friends, “thank you” is not just good manners—it's a **spiritual discipline**. It connects us to the divine and to each other. It reminds us: we are not self-made, **but God-made and community-shaped**.

To “pray without ceasing” is to be in direct and constant conversation both with God and with our neighbors—the One **from whom** our work originates and the

ones **for whom** we are called to care. This is the **sacred rhythm of Christian community**: receiving God's gifts, offering our thanks, and passing those gifts on to others.

Throughout this sermon series, we've journeyed through the **power of forgiveness**, the **necessity of healthy goodbyes**, the **profound reach of love**, and today, the **importance of gratitude**.

I pray these sacred phrases have **woven themselves deeper into the fabric of your hearts and lives**. They aren't just words; they are the **very language of faith**, the active expressions of **a life lived** in communion with God and one another.

We are experiencing **a pivotal moment for our church**. As we lean into the strategic visioning process happening now, focused on how we more boldly and specifically share God's love in our community and the wider world, remember that **pausing to say "thank you" is a profound gift**. It's a gift we offer to God, to each other, and even to ourselves.

Visioning naturally brings change, **and change, at its root, is hard**. We will likely need to say goodbye to some things we've done in the past, making room for **what God is calling us to in the future**. In those moments, let us be sure to proclaim "thank you" **loudly and proudly** for that foundational work! Moving on to something new does not discount what has been done; it instead is the **launching pad that will prepare us to do something more**.

The same will hold true for people. We are blessed with **so many devoted leaders** in this church, and as we live **our new dreams into being**, there will naturally be shifts. Some people will step into new roles, others might step down to rest, and some will lead us in ways we haven't yet imagined.

**All of which is good**,  
all is necessary,  
and "thank you" becomes **our essential work** in every season of transition.

God designed us as a community, a body where a rotation of many different people helps sustain the enormous work before us. **"Thank you" honors the people who have brought us to this vibrant place we celebrate**, and it **beautifully paves the way** for honoring the people who will continue to lead and serve into the future.

So, as we journey forward, **rooted in the truths of forgiveness, goodbye, love, and gratitude**, may we be **a people who say "thank you"**—not just for the easy times, but through it all—because God is with us.

May we be people who **can receive gifts graciously**, knowing that gratitude is not about debt but about deepening relationships.

And may we be people who **pass on the gifts we've received**, becoming part of God's ongoing work of healing and hope in this world.

In the name of the One who gives us all things— **We give thanks.** Amen.