

**THANKS-GIVING**  
**November 14, 2021 – St. John’s Presbyterian Church**  
**Richard Ollinger**

**Scripture Reading:** Deuteronomy 8:11-20  
I Thessalonians 5:12-22

Thank you, Patrick, Ridgley, and the Session of St. John’s, for the invitation to preach today on this Consecration Sunday. It has been a while since I’ve stood in this pulpit, or any pulpit for that matter. In fact, the last time I preached to a congregation was *here*, in August 2019. A lot has happened since August 2019, most notably of course the COVID-19 pandemic that has changed every aspect of life that we can think of, including the life of our St. John’s congregation.

These past 20 months have taken a toll on us, personally and corporately. We have been impacted **socially, emotionally, spiritually, and some of us physically**. I’ve said to Patrick on several occasions, “*I don’t know how you and Ridgley, and the Session, Deacons, and Trustees are handling what you have to handle in these days that are unlike anything we have ever experienced before!*”

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, in addition to home and family responsibilities and stresses, Patrick and the church’s leaders were pressed to come up with ways to provide online worship, online education, online pastoral care, and online meetings. More recently, there’s been the pressure to establish policies and to equip the building for us to safely return to in-person worship and Sunday school and other activities. ***It has been non-stop and high stress for 20 months, and it’s not over yet.*** Let me tell you, as someone who has worn pastor’s shoes, it’s overwhelming enough to be a pastor and a church officer in ordinary times. But to carry out those roles during all we have experienced these past months .... WOW! It’s more than I can even imagine.

So, before I even begin my sermon --- *and you thought I already started* --- I want to acknowledge what an incredibly wonderful job Patrick and Ridgley and Iris and the officers and scores of other members of this congregation have done since March 2020. Thank you, Patrick! Thank you, Ridgley! Thank you, Iris! Thank you, officers and members of St. John’s Presbyterian Church! You have served and are continuing to serve the Lord and this congregation with tremendous energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Thank you very much!

All my life, I have lived with the belief that the words “*Thank you*” are maybe the most important words we can speak, and that gratitude is the most important attitude and emotion we can hold in our hearts. To me, gratitude is the crowning virtue of life. That might be why the Bible tells us repeatedly to “*give thanks.*” In the Old Testament, we read over and over again the refrain “*Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever.*” In the New Testament, the command is given to “*Give thanks, always, for everything give thanks to God our Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” In our reading today from Thessalonians, the apostle Paul added to that command by writing, “*Give thanks to God, whatever the circumstances may be, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*” **Gratitude is at the very heart of faith.** In fact, I believe one of the most evident signs of Christian maturity is the ability to *give thanks*, to *show thanks*, and to *spread thanks*, always and in all circumstances.

Maybe you have heard before that when Mark Twain was at the peak of his career, his writing was valued at five dollars per word. One day someone wrote him a letter saying, “*Dear Mr. Twain: enclosed is \$5.00. Please send me your best word.*” Mark Twain responded by sending this one-word reply: “*Thanks!*”

What a great word for us to consider on Consecration Sunday. Is “*thanks*” our best word? Is a spirit of “*thanks*” the kind of spirit with which we are living life? Is “*thanks*” something we spread wherever we go?

For the last several weeks, Patrick and Ridgley have been asking us to prayerfully consider the question, “*What is God calling me to do,*” specifically as it relates to how we will contribute our gifts of time, talent, and treasure to the life and ministry of this church in the coming year. Each of us must answer that question in our own personal way, **but** I do believe that one thing God calls us all to do is to live our life with a spirit of thanksgiving, and to *express* thanks, to *show* thanks, and to *spread* thanks in any and all circumstances. Let me expand on that this morning.

**At one level, “thanks” is a spoken or written word we should regularly offer as an expression of appreciation and gratitude.** It’s a simple word, but one that has the power to uplift and heal and inspire and even transform.

In the Gospel of Luke there is a story about Jesus responding with compassion to the desperate pleas of ten men with leprosy asking to be healed. After being healed, only one of them came to Jesus to express thanks. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage wrote: “*No story in all the gospels so poignantly shows (people’s) ingratitude. The lepers came to Jesus with desperate longing; he cured them; and nine never came back to give thanks. So often, once a person has got what he (or she) wants, that person never comes back (to say thanks).*”

A group of friends were gathered for a high school reunion one weekend. They were sitting around talking about persons in their past who had inspired them. One member of the group said, “*You know, I am really grateful for my high school literature teacher, Miss Simpson. She was an inspiration to me.*” One of his friends asked, “*Did you ever tell her? Why don’t you write a letter of thanks to her?*” So, he did. That night he found her address and wrote a letter of thanks. A week later he got this reply:

*“Dear William: Thank you for your letter. I remember well your enthusiasm for (literature), especially your love for Tennyson. You will be interested to know that I taught school for fifty years and, in all that time, yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning, and it cheered my lonely old heart as nothing has cheered me in many years.”*

Is there a Miss Simpson in our life? Is there a card or letter that should be sent to a friend or family member to express our gratitude? Maybe there is a phone call or visit we need to make to someone who we know is lonely, or who is grieving, or who might need a boost of encouragement. Is there a word of thanks we need to speak to God?

There is a word of thanks to God I want to offer here this morning, and I hope I am offering it for others in this congregation. It is a word of thanks to God for the gift of our pastor, Patrick Marshall. This past week, we received a message that Patrick is on a medical leave of absence for an extended period of time. It is a scary and unsettling time for him, and Jen, their children, Patrick’s mother, and yes, for us too as a congregation. We are greatly concerned for Patrick and his family, and we surround them with our love and our prayers. *But let’s also surround Patrick with our gratitude.* We are fortunate to have a pastor who has a heart filled with compassion and grace, so much so that he carries with him constantly the weight of this congregation’s pastoral, spiritual, and administrative concerns, as well as the weight of his family’s concerns. I know and have served alongside many ministers, but few of them have the heart and spirit of a pastor. Patrick is one of the very few who possesses and models for others what the Apostle Paul calls the “clothes of God’s chosen;” those “clothes” are *compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* What a gift Patrick is to this congregation! Let us give thanks to God and show Patrick how grateful we are by extending to him in this time of rest and renewal the same compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and grace that he models for us.

“Thanks” is a word to be regularly spoken or written to others *and to God* as an expression of our appreciation and gratitude. **At a second level, “thanks” is an action we need to show.** Saying “thanks” is one thing. Showing “thanks” is something better!

Years ago in a Midwestern town, a little boy was born blind. When he was 5 years old his parents were told about a doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston who was specializing in a surgical procedure that might work for their son. Although ecstatic, when his parents learned the travel and medical costs, they knew it was all beyond their means. Word got out into the community and into their church, and money was raised to send them to Boston to cover the surgery.

As they were leaving home, the little boy grabbed his beloved tattered teddy bear. It had an ear chewed off, was missing an eye, and was bursting at the seams. The boy's mother said, "*Let's leave that old teddy bear at home and buy a new one when we get to Boston?*" But the boy insisted he take it, and off they went. He kept the teddy bear by his side through all the pre-op examinations, and on the morning of surgery, the hospital staff brought in two surgical gowns, one for the boy and a smaller one for the teddy bear.

The surgery went well. When the day came for the bandages to be removed, for the first time in his life the boy saw his parents' faces, he saw his doctor, and all the flowers, cards, and balloons he had received. And, for the first time he saw his tattered teddy bear. On the day he was discharged, when the surgeon came into the room to say goodbye, the boy handed him his teddy bear and said, "*You can have this! Thanks, for helping me.*" The doctor tried to refuse the gift, but he finally took it with great appreciation and said his goodbyes to the family.

The doctor was so moved by that boy's generosity that until the day he retired, displayed on the tenth floor of the White Building at Massachusetts General Hospital, was that teddy bear, bursting at the seams, with a chewed-off ear and one eye, and a sign under it, written in the hand of the surgeon that said, "*This is the highest fee I ever received for professional services rendered!*"

Saying "*thanks*" just wasn't enough for that little boy. He showed how thankful he was by giving away his most cherished possession. That's what I call "*thanks – giving!*" Somewhere this child learned one of life's most valuable lessons: **there is a beauty and a power in not only saying "*thanks*" but also showing, *concretely*, just how thankful we are.**

Isn't this the message behind the offering of our time, talents, and treasures to the church and to other organizations we choose to support? We give, *or at least we should give*, because we want to show how thankful we are for the blessings we have received. We give because we know that all we are and all we have, *including our families, our friends, our work, our health, our abilities, our wealth, and all our possessions* --- are gifts given to us by a loving and generous God.

Did you listen closely as Susanne read the words from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy? These are words attributed to Moses speaking to the children of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Moses was telling them to never forget what it means to be God's people by remembering to acknowledge with thanksgiving that behind all the blessings of life, *as well as behind all the challenges and sorrows of life*, is a generous, loving, and gracious God who is the giver, sustainer, and redeemer of life and everything in it. Listen, as I read this contemporary translation of these verses from Deuteronomy 8:

*"Take heed, lest you forget the Lord your God ... lest when you have eaten and are full, have built fancy houses and your investments pay dividends, you forget God. It is God who has brought you through the tough wilderness of your life and got you through troublesome circumstances. Beware, lest you begin to think, 'I am a self-made success. My own skill, ingenuity, and hard work have gotten me what I have.' You shall remember that it is really the Lord your God who has equipped you with an able body, capable mind, and the gift of life. Without God you could do nothing. Without God you would have nothing. Without God you would be nothing. Take heed, lest you forget the Lord your God."*

Today is a day of *thanks-giving* at St. John's. It is a day when we remember *with thanks* that God is the Provider and Sustainer of our life and everything in it. It is a day when we acknowledge *with thanks* the

presence and power of God at work in our lives and in the life of this church. It is a day when we respond to God's goodness *with thanks* rejoicing that God's "*steadfast love* (for us and for this world) *endures forever.*"

**"Thanks" is something we say. "Thanks" is something we show. And, finally, "thanks" is something we should be spreading everywhere we go.**

Our reading this morning from 1st Thessalonians reminds us that as Christ's followers we are to be encouragers and not *discouragers* of others. We are called to build others up with our acts of compassion, kindness, generosity, patience, prayer, and spirit of gratitude. Elsewhere in his writings, the Apostle Paul says, "*we are the aroma of Christ,*" meaning that by our actions, our attitudes, our words, and our faith, we are to be spreading a fragrance that is pleasing to others and to God.

A thankful spirit spreads a fragrance that we all like to inhale. No one likes to be around someone who constantly whines and moans about things. Sure, we all complain sometimes and vent our frustrations, but for some people it's a way of life. Rather than giving thanks to God for everything and in all circumstances, some people choose to make complaining an everyday habit.

There is a story about a man who entered a monastery that was noted for its commitment to silence. Every person in the monastery took a vow of total silence. At the end of each year, they were allowed to speak two words to the Abbot, the head of the monastery. The new monk arrived and immediately dedicated himself to the vow of silence. Along with others, he didn't speak a word for one whole year. At the end of the first year, he came to the Abbot's office to speak his two words. The words he chose to say were, "***Food bad!***"

Another year went by, and he returned to speak two more words to the Abbot. This time he said, "***Room small!***" At the end of the third year of silence, he came back to the Abbot and this time said, "***Bed uncomfortable!***" At last, after four years he appeared before the Abbot and said, "***Want out!***" The Abbot replied, "***Well, I'm not surprised, all you have done since you've been here is complain!***"

I think at the end of any given year, if there were only two words that I could speak, I would choose the words, "*Thank you.*" Of all the attitudes with which we can choose to live our lives, *I believe* the most beautiful, the most beneficial, and the most Christ-like is one of gratitude. There is no response to life more positive, more powerful, more infectious, or healthier for us than thankfulness. It's true! Scientific studies have found that gratitude is associated with:

- greater happiness
- more optimism and positive emotions
- new and lasting relationships
- better health
- greater progress in reaching personal and professional goals
- fewer aches and pains
- more alertness and determination
- better sleep
- improved self-esteem
- increased empathy and generosity

There is absolutely no downside to practicing gratitude. In fact, it has been said that God has two homes: one, in Heaven, and the other in a thankful heart. I pray that God is at home in our hearts, and that each of us will honor God today and every day by *saying, showing, and spreading* thanks always and for everything, whatever the circumstances might be. Amen.