



**CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY
NOVEMBER 25, 2018
“GRATITUDE AND GOODWILL”**

JOHN 18: 33-37

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

SERMON

TWO OLD FRIENDS MEET ON THE STREET ONE DAY. ONE LOOKS SAD, ALMOST ON THE VERGE OF TEARS. HIS FRIEND ASKS, “WHAT HAS GOT YOU SO DOWN, OLD FRIEND?”

“LET ME TELL YOU, HE SAYS, “THREE WEEKS AGO MY UNCLE DIED AND LEFT ME FORTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.”

“THAT’S A LOT OF MONEY.”

“BUT YOU SEE, TWO WEEKS AGO A COUSIN I NEVER KNEW DIED AND LEFT ME EIGHTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS.”

“SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU’VE BEEN VERY BLESSED.”

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. LAST WEEK MY GREAT-AUNT PASSED AWAY. I INHERITED A QUARTER OF A MILLION DOLLARS!”

NOW THE MAN’S FRIEND IS REALLY CONFUSED.

“THEN WHY DO YOU LOOK SO SAD?”

“THIS WEEK. NOTHING!”



LAST WEEK AT THE CONGREGATIONAL MEETING, PASTOR TOM SPOKE ELOQUENTLY ABOUT THE CHANGE IN SPIRIT AT THE MEETING. THE PREVIOUS YEAR, TENSION AND UNDERLYING NEGATIVITY. THIS YEAR, A POSITIVE, SUPPORTIVE, JOYOUS SPIRIT.

LIKELY, WE ALL KNOW THE SLOGAN, “AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE.”

AND AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE ISSUES IN A SPIRIT OF GOODWILL TOWARD ONE ANOTHER.

AT CLC, WE’RE DONE WITH NEGATIVITY: COMPLAINTS, CRITICISMS, GRIEVANCES, GRUMBLING.

ANYONE CAN SAY NO. ANYONE CAN CRITICIZE. THAT’S EASY. BUT IT IS NOT RIGHT.

WE’RE DONE WITH THE NEGATIVITY.

WE ARE FREE TO CHOOSE ANOTHER WAY.

IN WINNIE THE POOH, “PIGLET NOTICED THAT EVEN THOUGH HE HAD A VERY SMALL HEART, IT COULD HOLD A RATHER LARGE AMOUNT OF GRATITUDE.”

WITHIN TWELVE STEP GROUPS, THERE IS A SAYING THAT AIMS TO CUT OFF THE IMPULSIVE AND REACTIVE NEGATIVITY.

“TAKE WHAT YOU CAN USE AND LEAVE THE REST.”

IN EVERY SITUATION, THERE IS SOMETHING POSITIVE TO BE GLEANED, SOME WISDOM TO BE GAINED, SOME BLESSING BESTOWED.

MAINTAINING A POSITIVE SPIRIT—AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE—IS A CHALLENGING SPIRITUAL TASK. ESPECIALLY IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH, AS ODD AS THAT MAY SEEM.

BUT WE CAN DO IT, IF WE ALL JOIN IN TOGETHER.

WITH THANKSGIVING BARELY BEHIND US, LET’S FOCUS ON GRATITUDE AND GOODWILL THIS MORNING AND ALL THE DAYS AHEAD OF US.



THROUGHOUT MY SERMON, I AM GOING TO USE WORDS WRITTEN BY A MAN WHOSE NAME I WILL REVEAL AT THE CONCLUSION.

HE WRITES, “EVERYTHING CAN BE TAKEN FROM US BUT ONE THING: THE LAST OF THE HUMAN FREEDOMS—TO CHOOSE ONE’S ATTITUDE IN ANY GIVEN SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, TO CHOOSE ONE’S OWN WAY.”

SO, I CHOOSE TO EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE TO YOU FOR CALLING ME AS YOUR PASTOR. NEVER WOULD I HAVE THOUGHT I WOULD BE THE CALLED PASTOR OF A CONGREGATION AT THIS POINT IN MY LIFE. MY LAST CALL TO A CONGREGATION WAS IN 1987. MY CALL FOR THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS HAS BEEN AS A PASTORAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST.

BUT THE SPIRIT OF GOD HAD OTHER PLANS FOR YOU AND US. I DEEPLY FEEL THIS CALL WITHIN MY HEART AND SOUL. PERHAPS THE DEEPEST SENSE OF CALL I HAVE EXPERIENCED IN MY LIFE. THE CALL TO BE WITH YOU IN OUR LIVES TOGETHER CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER AND THOSE AROUND US IN THE COMMUNITY OF MILLVALE AND BEYOND. I FEEL CALLED TO BE WITH OTHERS, PAID AND VOLUNTEER, WHO MAKE UP OUR TEAM OF LEADERS. A TALENTED AND COMMITTED GROUP OF BELIEVERS.

A SPIRIT OF GOODWILL, A POSITIVE SPIRIT, A GRATEFUL SPIRIT IS A FRAGILE THING. IT DOES TAKE ALL OF US. A NEGATIVE SPIRIT QUICKLY INFECTS EVERYTHING. THE SPIRIT OF GOD SPREADS SLOWLY, TAKING TIME TO SETTLE INTO THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF A COMMUNITY. JUST CONSIDER HOW QUICKLY DIVISIVENESS, UGLINESS, AND HATRED HAVE SPREAD THROUGHOUT OUR COUNTRY AND YOU WILL REALIZE HOW DELICATE AND GENTLE IS A POSITIVE SPIRIT.

LET US GUARD IT WELL TOGETHER....

AND HOW DO WE GUARD THE SPIRIT OF GOODWILL WITH ONE ANOTHER?

AGAIN, THE WORDS OF MY SECRET AUTHOR. I APOLOGIZE FOR THE MASCULINE PRONOUNS, BUT HE IS OF ANOTHER GENERATION, “LOVE IS THE ONLY WAY TO GRASP ANOTHER HUMAN BEING IN THE INNERMOST CORE OF HIS PERSONALITY. NO ONE CAN BECOME FULLY AWARE OF THE VERY ESSENCE OF ANOTHER HUMAN BEING UNLESS HE LOVES HIM. BY HIS LOVE HE IS ENABLED TO SEE THE ESSENTIAL TRAITS AND FEATURES IN THE BELOVED PERSON; AND EVEN MORE, HE SEES THAT WHICH IS POTENTIAL IN HIM, WHICH IS NOT YET ACTUALIZED BUT YET OUGHT TO BE ACTUALIZED. FURTHERMORE, BY HIS LOVE, THE LOVING PERSON ENABLES THE BELOVED PERSON TO ACTUALIZE THESE POTENTIALITIES. BY MAKING HIM AWARE OF WHAT



HE CAN BE AND OF WHAT HE SHOULD BECOME, HE MAKES THESE POTENTIALITIES COME TRUE.”

FOR ME, THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST POTENT MANIFESTATIONS OF LOVE. THAT WE SEE ANOTHER PERSON FOR WHAT HE OR SHE CAN BECOME GIVEN THE RIGHT SUPPORT, CARE, AND ENCOURAGEMENT.

THE EXAMPLE IN OUR MIDST IS STEVE SLEPECKI. WE HAVE SEEN HIM THROUGH THIS FORM OF LOVE SO THAT HE, TOO, CAN SEE HIS GIFTS FOR MINISTRY. AND SO, HIS POTENTIAL FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY IS UNFOLDING BEFORE OUR VERY EYES WITHIN THIS LOVE.

CAN YOU IMAGINE LOVING EACH PERSON HERE IN THIS SAME LOVING GOODWILL?

ANOTHER FAVORITE AUTHOR, THE PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER, FREDERICK BUECHNER WRITES, “TURN AROUND AND BELIEVE THAT THE GOOD NEWS THAT WE ARE LOVED IS BETTER THAN WE EVER DARED HOPE, AND THAT TO BELIEVE IN THAT GOOD NEWS, TO LIVE OUT OF IT, TO BE IN LOVE WITH THAT GOOD NEWS, IS OF ALL GLAD THINGS IN THIS WORLD, THE GLADDEST OF ALL.”

THIS “LOVING GOOD NEWS SPIRITUAL SEEING” IS WHAT IS NEEDED FOR EACH PERSON HERE, ESPECIALLY FOR ALL OUR TEENS AND CHILDREN, NOT JUST A CHOSEN FEW. LET US FORM OUR MINISTRIES WITH THIS LOVE AND GOODWILL AT THE CENTER.

AGAIN, MY UNDISCLOSED AUTHOR, “DON’T AIM AT SUCCESS. THE MORE YOU AIM AT IT AND MAKE IT A TARGET, THE MORE YOU ARE GOING TO MISS IT. FOR SUCCESS, LIKE HAPPINESS, CANNOT BE PURSUED; IT MUST ARISE, AND IT ONLY DOES SO AS THE UNINTENDED SIDE EFFECT OF ONE’S PERSONAL DEDICATION TO A CAUSE GREATER THAN ONESELF OR AS THE BY-PRODUCT OF ONE’S SURRENDER TO A PERSON OTHER THAN ONESELF.”

WE ALL FAIL AT THE IMPORTANT TASKS OF LIFE WHEN OUR EGO GETS IN THE WAY; WHEN WE WANT ACCOLADES OR SUCCESS OR CREDIT OR THE SPOTLIGHT.

MAINTAINING A SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE AND GOODWILL MEANS NOT CARING WHO GETS THE CREDIT OR THE THANKS AS LONG AS THE GREATER PURPOSE, THE GREATER CAUSE, THE SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD IS BEING SERVED....

IN OUR GOSPEL THIS MORNING, WE HEAR THESE WORDS OF JESUS, “FOR THIS PURPOSE I HAVE COME INTO THE WORLD—TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE TRUTH.”



SIMPLY PUT, WE HAVE A CHOICE TO MOVE IN TWO DIRECTIONS IN FOLLOWING JESUS.

THE FIRST IS EXCLUSIVE AND NARROW. THIS IS THE CHOICE TO SEE ONLY JESUS AS SPEAKING WORDS OF TRUTH. THIS PATH LEADS TO CONDEMNING NON-BELIEVERS AND PERSONS OF OTHER FAITHS. THIS OFTEN ALSO LEADS TO A SMUG STANCE WHERE SOME CHRISTIANS THINK THEY ARE BETTER THAN OTHERS BECAUSE THEY SEE ONLY THEMSELVES AS POSSESSING THE TRUTH.

THE SECOND IS INCLUSIVE AND EXPANSIVE. I FIND THE WORDS OF THE BRILLIANT ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN, THOMAS AQUINAS, TO BE INSTRUCTIVE. HE WRITES, "IF SOMETHING IS TRUE, NO MATTER WHO SAID IT, IT IS ALWAYS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT."

THIS STANCE OPENS OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO WORDS OF TRUTH FLOWING FROM EVERY GREAT FAITH TRADITION AND OUR PHILOSOPHERS, SCIENTISTS, AND EVERY HUMAN DISCIPLINE.

BECAUSE OF JESUS CHRIST, THERE ARE NOW IMMEASURABLE AVENUES OF WISDOM AND HEALING THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE. AN EVER-EXPANDING BODY OF TRUTH. THROUGH THIS LENS, WE HAVE COUNTLESS OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRATITUDE EACH DAY. AND WE CAN EXTEND GOODWILL TO PEOPLE OF EVERY COLOR OF THE RAINBOW.

AGAIN, OUR MYSTERIOUS AUTHOR, "MAN DOES NOT SIMPLY EXIST, BUT ALWAYS DECIDES WHAT HIS EXISTENCE WILL BE, WHAT HE WILL BECOME THE NEXT MOMENT. BY THE SAME TOKEN, EVERY HUMAN BEING HAS THE FREEDOM TO CHANGE AT ANY INSTANT."

WHAT SETS APART THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO LIFE FROM OTHER APPROACHES IS THE TRUTH THAT TRANSFORMATION, BLESSING, REDEMPTION, AND SALVATION ARE FOUND THROUGH OUR EXPERIENCES OF SUFFERING WHICH, IF WE VIEW THEM CORRECTLY, ARE OUR MOST PROFOUND EXPERIENCES FOR WHICH WE ARE GRATEFUL.

ONCE AGAIN, OUR CLANDESTINE WRITER, "IN SOME WAYS SUFFERING CEASES TO BE SUFFERING AT THE MOMENT IT FINDS A MEANING. THERE IS NO NEED TO BE ASHAMED OF TEARS, FOR TEARS BEAR WITNESS THAT A MAN HAD THE GREATEST OF COURAGE, THE COURAGE TO SUFFER."

AND ONE FINAL THOUGHT FROM HIM, "DOESTOEVSKI SAID ONCE, "THERE IS ONLY ONE THING I DREAD: NOT TO BE WORTHY OF MY SUFFERINGS." THESE WORDS FREQUENTLY CAME TO MY



MIND AFTER I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH THOSE MARTYRS WHOSE BEHAVIOR IN CAMP, WHOSE SUFFERING AND DEATH BORE WITNESS TO THE FACT THAT THE LAST INNER FREEDOM CANNOT BE LOST. IT CAN BE SAID THAT THEY WERE WORTHY OF THEIR SUFFERINGS; THE WAY THEY BORE THEIR SUFFERINGS WAS A GENUINE INNER ACHIEVEMENT. IT IS THIS SPIRITUAL FREEDOM WHICH CANNOT BE TAKEN AWAY—THAT MAKES LIFE MEANINGFUL AND PURPOSEFUL.”

OUR AUTHOR IS VIKTOR FRANKL, WHO SURVIVED THE HORRORS OF THE NAZI CONCENTRATIONS CAMPS. HE EMERGED TRANSFORMED BY HIS SUFFERINGS AND THE SUFFERING SURROUNDING HIM, WITH A SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE AND GOODWILL, BECOMING THE FATHER OF A PSYCHOTHERAPY CALLED LOGOTHERAPY.

FRANKL DESCRIBES HOW, TIME AFTER TIME, HE WAITED FOR FATE TO TAKE ITS COURSE AS PRISONERS TOOK THEIR TURNS STANDING IN FRONT OF AN SS OFFICER WHO CASUALLY POINTED THEM TO THE RIGHT, WHICH MEANT THEY LOOKED PHYSICALLY FIT FOR MANUAL LABOR, OR TO THE LEFT, WHICH MEANT THEY WOULD BE SENT TO THE GAS CHAMBERS.

FRANKL RECALLS WHEN THEY WERE TAKEN TO THE SHOWERS AND ALL THEIR CLOTHES AND POSSESSIONS WERE TAKEN FROM THEM. DESPERATE TO KEEP THE MANUSCRIPT OF HIS FIRST BOOK, WHICH HE HAD IN HIS COAT POCKET, HE TRIED TO ENLIST THE HELP OF AN OLDER PRISONER. THE PRISONER GRINNED AT FRANKL AND THEN CURSED HIM. AT THIS MOMENT, FRANKL SAYS HE REALISED THAT HE WOULD HAVE TO “STRIKE OUT HIS WHOLE FORMER LIFE.”

PRISONERS SUFFERED FREQUENT BEATINGS FROM THE GUARDS, EDEMA FROM WORKING IN THE ICE AND SNOW IN WORN-OUT SHOES, AND OUTBREAKS OF TYPHUS. ALL WERE SEVERELY MALNOURISHED, RECEIVING ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF BREAD AND WATERY SOUP EVERY DAY. MANY STARVED TO DEATH.

FRANKL EXPLAINS THAT PEOPLE WHO WERE ABLE TO FIND MEANING IN THEIR RICH INNER LIVES HAD BETTER CHANCES OF NOT ONLY SURVIVING THE CAMPS BUT OF LESSENING THE DAMAGE TO THEIR INNER SOULS. HE ILLUSTRATES THIS WITH A MOVING PASSAGE ON THE LOVING THOUGHTS ABOUT HIS WIFE THAT SUSTAINED HIM WHILE HE DUG DITCHES IN THE DEAD OF WINTER. FRANKL CARRIED ON A CONVERSATION WITH HIS WIFE IN HIS MIND, NOT KNOWING IF SHE WAS ALIVE OR DEAD BUT FEELING THAT HE WAS IN REAL COMMUNION WITH HER EITHER WAY.



DURING THIS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE, FRANKL CONCLUDED THAT “LOVE IS THE ULTIMATE AND HIGHEST GOAL TO WHICH WE CAN ASPIRE” AND THAT “OUR SALVATION IS THROUGH LOVE AND IN LOVE.”

EVEN IN THE MOST DESOLATE SITUATION, WHEN THERE IS NO POSSIBILITY OF TAKING SIGNIFICANT ACTION TO CHANGE ONE’S CIRCUMSTANCES, MEANING CAN BE FOUND IN LOVE. THIS BECAME PART OF HIS LOGOTHERAPEUTIC THEORY.

GRATITUDE IN ALL THINGS. GOODWILL TOWARD ALL.

EVERYONE CAN CHOOSE, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES WHAT “WILL BECOME OF HIM OR HER—MENTALLY AND SPIRITUALLY.”

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE WE ARE AND WILL BE IS THE RESULT OF OUR INNER DECISION RATHER THAN OUR LIFE SITUATIONS. WE CAN BEAR OUR SUFFERING WITH DIGNITY.

IT IS THIS SPIRITUAL FREEDOM—WHICH CANNOT BE TAKEN AWAY—THAT MAKES OUR LIVES MEANINGFUL AND PERSONAL....”

THE MYSTIC MEISTER ECKHART SAYS, “IF THE ONLY PRAYER YOU SAID WAS THANK YOU THAT WOULD BE ENOUGH.”

AND, MAYA ANGELOU, “LET GRATITUDE BE THE PILLOW UPON WHICH YOU KNEEL TO SAY YOUR NIGHTLY PRAYER. AND LET FAITH BE THE BRIDGE YOU BUILD TO OVERCOME EVIL AND WELCOME GOOD.”

SERMON SONG

HOW SWEET IT IS TO BE LOVED BY YOU BY JAMES TAYLOR