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We are a People who give Thanks

Pray

Do you ever feel like being a Christian is difficult? Do you ever feel like the actual tasks of discipleship- like prayer, obedience, worship, coming to church, giving, forgiving- that these are difficult things to do? For many of us who go to church we put our best foot forward at being a Christian; we try our best to live in love, to care for each other, to give to the needy, but it still seems like if we're honest, that we just don't have the complete package. In fact I've heard some of you describe yourselves in this light as 'ordinary Christians.' Of course, if this is true than ordinary Christians differ from those extraordinary Christians who somehow were born with superhuman willpower, a unique capacity to hear God's voice, and nameless character traits that are

above and beyond the grasp of ordinary Christians. Some think these extraordinary Christians become part of church staffs, pastors, and of course the most austere position of all which requires the most faith, divine patience, and love- the church treasurer.

Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian Minister and writer, says that Christianity is not difficult. In fact, he writes, ‘The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian. What is hard is to be a sinner. Being a Christian is what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption.’¹

Maybe that’s not our experience. I know my experience of walking the life of faith is one of sputtering starts and many stops. For me, and maybe for you, I keep on forgetting who I really am. I keep on forgetting who I am in Christ and what I am worth to God. When I forget this I loose heart; I fall and stumble and loose my

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Long Obedience*, p 115.

joy, hope, and my love. So over the next two weeks I would like to talk about two parts of the Christian life that will help us remember the truth about who we are in Christ and what we are worth to God. Today I am going to talk about who we are in Christ and what we mean to God and how Thankfulness helps us remember. Next week we'll talk about Joy.

Now, onto to thankfulness. Edward Bounds, a Methodist minister at the turn of the last century, explains that "Thanksgiving is just what the word itself signifies- the giving of thanks to God. It is giving something to God in words which we feel at heart for blessings received." "Thanksgiving," he writes, "is oral, positive, active. It is the giving out of something to God. Thanksgiving comes out in to the open." And Edward Bounds says that the source of this thankfulness is gratitude. He says, "Gratitude is felt in the heart. Gratitude arises from a contemplation of the goodness of God. It is bred by serious meditation on what God has done for

us. **Gratitude is born when we meditate on God's grace and mercy.**²

Let me tell a silly story that might illustrate how gratitude- the intimate knowledge of God's grace and mercy- gives birth to thankfulness. Our two year old, Levi, has been crying at times in the middle of the night and we would pull him into our bed for the rest of the night- after all there's nothing more precious than your little child sleeping next to you. Well, last Sunday he turned two and April and I are getting tired of the nightly fits – not to mention that our precious child has gotten in the habit of sleeping on our heads, hogging the covers, and waking us up three or four times a night.

So, last Wednesday he went back into his crib and he was not happy. For two hours he screamed and cried; he scaled the side of his crib three times, dropped four feet to the floor, and ran to the door to cry some more. Now, every parent hates it when his or her

² Edwards M. Bounds, *The Essentials of Prayer*, as quoted from *Devotional Classics* by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith.

child cries. So we intentionally went outside, put on the baby monitor, started a fire in our fire pit and enjoyed a glass of wine to help us hear our child better. For the first thirty minutes it was bearable until our neighbor right next door, who is 19, came into his back yard, 12 feet away from where we were sitting, and started playing heavy metal quite loud. For the next hour and half we sat in front of our fire with our child screaming upstairs while our next door neighbor was blasting music that sounded like someone was skinning a cat while crashing their car.

And then, within 30 seconds of each other, Levi stopped crying and went to sleep and our neighbor turned off his music. The sound of silence was never more beautiful. Deep within my heart was a profound sense of gratitude of God's mercy for we had been spared going completely insane. Both of us looked at each other and started laughing. Coming from deep within was our gratitude that expressed itself in prayers of thanks, spurts of laughter, and songs of praise.

It's so easy to forget God's love, mercy, and grace when the kids are crying and heavy metal is playing. It's so easy to forget what God has done for us in Christ and what God is doing for us in Christ right now in the midst of our busy lives. This is why, as God's people, we are called to be thankful. There is only one Greek word in the New Testament this is always translated as 'be thankful' or 'thanksgiving', or 'thanks'. That word is Eucharisto- it's where we get the word Eucharist- what we now call The Lord's Supper or Communion. Jesus commands us to celebrate this community meal together – and to keep on celebrating it- for God knows that we are a forgetful people and God wants us to remember who we are and what we are worth to God. In communion we remember and give thanks for the unmistakable and incredible love God has shown us in Jesus. Remember, **gratitude is born when we meditate on God's grace and mercy.**

This last week Beau Smith, my friend and our Director of College Ministries here at the church, was ordained in Colorado as a Presbyterian Minister. His old mentor and pastor, Howard

Childers, gave the charge to Beau and in it he told Beau about how God feels and thinks about us all. This is what he said- Lord help us to hear these words and absorb them so we can be grateful.

It is crucial in my mind that in all times and in all places that I know deep in my heart who I am in Christ, and what I am worth in the eyes of God. Especially do I need to know this when I am in crisis, under siege from without or from within- that when that happens I won't panic, won't despair, but tell and retell myself who I am in Christ and what I am worth in the eyes of God.

There might be a time in our lives when someone, and they even might be from the church thinking they are doing God a favor, might say something to you that would make you doubt who you are and what you are worth. Unless you really know the answer to these questions then you might be tempted to trade this all for a mess of porridge, or just give it away. And if you did this it would be a sad day in the

Kingdom of God- you would be throwing away your birthright- the simple and profound gift God gives us. You would be saying that God had a bad idea when he created me, that God had a bad idea when he adopted me as his child, and even worse idea when God called me to ministry in this church. Jesus really shouldn't have gone to all that trouble for dying for me. But instead of falling apart in those moments, you could remember- retell and remember who you are and what you're worth- and then you'll then know what to do and even the first steps to take.

You are a child a God. You are a child of the King. Christ found you when you were homeless and living out of dumpsters and he called you to follow him; he gave you a new name and a new heart and a new life and a reason to live and a reason to die. He gave you a second birth. This time you weren't born as a result of your parent's passion; you were born of God's passion. This time you didn't emerge

from your mother's womb, this time you were born from God's heart.

You are God's property. You belong to God alone. He owns you outright, lock, stock, and barrel. God owns the deed to your heart. You were bought and paid for by a currency so costly, so holy, when you think about it, it will make you cry. And because you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God, everything that counts in this life and the next, everything that matters- it's yours right now. You are rich beyond all description. Buried deep, deep inside of you are the genes and chromosomes of God- you're true DNA can be traced back to Bethlehem's manger.

You're loved, accepted, and forgiven by God and his church. God cannot love you anymore right now than he already loves you. God loves you as much as he loves his own Son. You're forgiven everything. Everything. Christ died for your sins- not just for some of them- all of them. He has paid your un-payable debt. He's covered it; he's nailed

the charges against you to his cross. The darkness that once broke your heart, and it should have, that once pinned you to the dust, and it should have, is forever lifted. You're free. Your sin is forever forgotten. You might ask God about it but he has forgotten. You're filled with God's life and with God's Spirit.

You are human being filled with Christ, as full as anyone is ever going to be. You're a new creation; a new born babe; no past to drag you down anymore and you're whole life is before you. You no longer need to eat from the dumpsters of death; you sit now at God's table- at God's table. You sit at the only table that can keep you alive and pump life into you. The sign that hangs over your life reads 'Under Construction'. You're a holy work in progress. God is rebuilding you from the ground up. He's restoring his own image in you and it's going to take a while, but when God's finished you're going to look like Jesus- the spittin' image of Jesus.

Until then, you'll look like others, but deep inside you carry the living Christ. You carry the Holy Spirit, who defends you, who comforts you, who teaches you and gives you whatever it takes to live out your life for Christ. Deep inside you carry the gospel, the words of eternal life; deep inside you carry the keys of the Kingdom. For us Presbyterians it means that whenever you speak the truth about Jesus, God gives you power and authority to open wide the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven to a broken, fragmented, and lost world.

You're the aroma of Christ. You smell like the Garden of Eden after a rain. You smile like the wildflowers of Nazareth after Jesus walks through them. You are a celebration looking for a place to break out. You have Easter written all over you, from head to toe. You are a citizen of a country far grander than any of this world has ever seen.

And God has given this to you simply because one day you said yes to Jesus. It's a gift. It's a pure gift. You don't owe God anything except gratitude.

So, given this gospel truth about who we are, the only response from a heart full of gratitude for God's love for us is thanks.

Thank you, God- thank you. I'll close with one last story. I'm celebrating four years at our church this September and over those four years you've supported my family and my son as we've journeyed together through wonderful and tough times. I've told you a lot about Jonah, who turned four in May, and the struggles we've had with his cerebral palsy and his seizures. And I've told you about what that's been like for me as his Dad, the grief I've had and also my joy.

This past Monday I was holding him in my arms, reading a story together, and God spoke to me – I have heard God's voice this clearly only a couple times in my life and this is what he said. God said, "Andy, you've thought for a long time that Jonah's difficulties are something I've done to you." At this point I knew

God was speaking and so I said, “Yes, you’re completely right.”

And then God said, “Son, I knew exactly what I was doing when I created Jonah. He is made perfectly and he is made in my image. I have not made a mistake. He is made for my glory and he reflects my glory just as I want him too.” And when I heard this I repented of my foolish pride and I said thank you. And something broke loose from within me- a deep weight and lie about who I was to God and how much God cared for me.

Brothers and Sisters, you are God’s child. No matter how broken or foolish you are, no matter your past or present, the truth about who you are is secured- you have been bought by the costly blood of Jesus Christ because God loves you and God wants to make you new, whole, and complete. So let us say yes to Jesus. Let us remember each day this truth by giving thanks, by remembering, by breaking the bread of communion together as Christ’s church in grateful praise. Let us be the people we really are- grateful and giving thanks for all that God has done for us as

his precious children. Give thanks for the Lord is Good, his love
endures forever.