

“FOR SPIRITUAL GRATITUDE”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
By The Rev. Rob Dyer
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(transcribed from audio file)

Responsive Reading today is Psalm 100.

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Serve the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him; bless his name.
For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations. NRSVue*

Our Scripture Reading this morning is from Psalm 103.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,*

*his acts to the people of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.
The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers who do his will.
Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul. NRSVue*

Lifting Gratitude with Psalm 136.

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
O give thanks to the God of gods,*

*for his steadfast love endures forever.
O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who spread out the earth on the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who struck Egypt through their firstborn,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and brought Israel out from among them,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who divided the Red Sea in two,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and made Israel pass through the midst of it,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who led his people through the wilderness,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who made water flow from the rock,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who struck down great kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and killed famous kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and Og, king of Bashan,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and gave their land as a heritage,*

*for his steadfast love endures forever;
a heritage to his servant Israel,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
O give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever. NRSVue*

You know what I think is great about the gratitudes that you have lifted up this day is to hear all of these places and times that your gratitude comes from. For some of you, the gratitude is flowing out of memories from the past and things that have happened. For some of you it's very present. It's in relationships that you're in right now. You're grateful to God for things that you have received, but I also hear gratitude for God just for other people being there and for the connections that they have – the overlap that they have in your life. For the gift of life itself to give thanks for that as I heard. I think that there are so many beautiful and wonderful things for us to be grateful for and this is the life that we're invited to. The love of our God is a life of gratitude.

Sometimes we think about our lives of faith as we're being invited into a life of servitude, of serving God and serving others. While that is part of the calling, it all stems from one important concept and that is that simply we are grateful. We are grateful for life itself. We are grateful for the opportunities and the obstacles that come. We are grateful for the celebrations and even some of those struggles as well, but we find gratitude in all this and so of course we want to help one another to see that and to experience that.

It isn't always easy to have that attitude of gratitude, is it? There are things that come along in life and they throw a cloud over things. But when these situations come up in our life, the truth is that we have an opportunity to choose how we see the situation. And it really can go either way for us. You think about the events of your past. You had a past. There are things in your life that have happened and they are really challenging. There's a way to look at that and say, "Oh my goodness. Life has been really hard." And there is another way to look at it and say, "My life was hard, but I'm better now." The same exact situation.

You can even look back in your life and see when things were really fantastic and say, “Oh my goodness. I’ve been blessed. Look back in my life. Look at how God has blessed me.” But the very same person could say, “Oh my goodness. My life used to be so good. There used to be all these blessings.” The same situation. It’s just a different attitude that comes into it.

You can look at your present-day situation. Something that is right there in front of you and you’re in the midst of hard times and you say, “This is what life is. This dark cloud of what my life is right now. This one problem in front of me. It’s just the full representation of everything in life and that’s it. It’s terrible.”

Or, you can have struggles that are upon you in the present time, and you can say, “Well, okay. I know that things can be different because it wasn’t like this the whole time.”

When things are going really great for you, quite honestly, we don’t reflect much at all. We just go, well that’s good and we move on. But there is an opportunity there to see that as evidence of goodness and grace and mercy and blessings in our life.

We look to the future. We could say, “Things could be worse” and that could be a form of strength. You could look at any situation you’re in and go “Well, things could be worse” and it gives you a sense of appreciation for the moment. It gives you some hope, or it can be, “Things could get worse!” And it could be an expectation that things are just going to go downhill.

When we look at our past or our present or our future, we have decisions to make on how we are going to view this world. And quite honestly, there is enough going on in this life that it can feel like a coin toss as to whether or not this is going to be feeling gratitude or grounded down.

When you look at the Psalms, so many of them are about thanksgiving. We threw 3 in today but there are many more. It’s the most common theme in the Psalms and in fact it is an over-riding theme in all the holy scriptures which is one of gratitude, of thanksgiving for what we’ve been given by God, what we’ve received. It is clearly the kind of mindset that we are called to have as people of faith.

And when you look at these Psalms there is a word that is in so many of these Psalms that we translate as steadfast love. Did you hear that phrase a couple of times today in the scriptures that we read? Maybe in all of them. Maybe you said it 100 times or it feels like 100 times, but that all comes from that one word – that Hebrew word,

hesed. You clear your throat and then you say, said and that word doesn't have an English translation. We fumble it around. We put a lot of words behind it.

The most common translation in our Bible is steadfast love. When you see steadfast love in your Bible, you know that was that Hebrew word hesed. Hesed has so many wonderful English translations because we can't get our head quite around it. The one that I enjoy – habitual kindness. The idea that it is a kindness that flows, it is a habit. It's a habit of God to have that hesed for us. We're intended to have that type of habitual kindness where it's not something that I well up, it's a habit that I have of letting kindness flow out of my life.

Steadfast love, a wonderful phrase. The idea that it is love that is there, that you can count on. I heard another definition of it that I've kinda grown fond of recently which is, hesed is love with a promise. It's not just love. It's love with a promise, with a covenant that it will be there. That while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Not that we earned any of this love, or grace, or blessing that we have, but it is showered upon us because of a promise from God. It's love with a promise and that is the game changer. Steadfast love. God's steadfast love is the game changer as to how you look at it. God's telling us, I've been here the whole time. You just have to see that and so when you look upon these hard times, it can be a source of hope and strength. When you look upon the joyous times, it's a time to stop and celebrate and appreciate because when we believe in the steadfast love of God, when we believe there is love with a promise, that means we can be people of hope as we look at these circumstances.

We understand that the world is not 100% dark, and it doesn't come out 100% light for us, but we know that through the dark valley that God will be with us. We know that we will be supplied not always with what we want but we will receive what we need. God has plans and God has made promises to love us. And so, we the people of faith, we're given salvation. We're given this forgiveness. We're given this life. We're given this blessing so that our lives can flow, not with accomplishments, but that it can flow with gratitude. Do you know what it's like to be around people who are grateful to be alive; who are grateful for the situations they are in; who can look in the midst of any situation and their response out of it is gratitude. Do you know the power in moments like that? And you, as people of faith, you have the opportunity to be that witness.

I had an instance years ago and I'm not going to use any names, because they are here today. I had the beautiful privilege to be sitting alongside the bedside of a woman as she was passing away, and her husband was holding her hand. And in the

moment when she passed away, he just looked over at me and he said, “I am so thankful to God that he gave me her.”

That moment could have gone either way. It could have gone into anger. It could have gone into devastation, and it is okay if it goes into anger. It’s okay if it goes into devastation, but you know what was one of the most beautiful moments of my life? Was sitting in that room and watching that Christian man give thanks to God for the gift; recognizing that this end which all things come to an end, but recognizing in this end, as tragic as it might have been, and we’ve all had our tragedies in our lives, and it is hard to have this view, but oh my goodness when you can, you transform your life and you transform the lives of the people around you. Many of us have walked together through some dark valleys. We’ve been in some really dark places, but at some point, one of us has been able to be there for the other and find light because we know that God’s steadfast love endures forever.

God’s steadfast love endures forever. And when one of us loses sight of it, this is what we do. We be the light, cause sometimes you just need some light in that moment.

If you are in one of those places right now where you’re feeling a little bit more of the darkness than you are the light, then maybe that Needs Among Us card is for you today. Maybe you just need a little extra support, a little extra help, maybe something physical, or tangible, or maybe you just need some light. You put that down and then you give that to me, or you put it in the offering box and next week we’ll be part of that light for one another because God’s steadfast love endures forever.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.