

## GRATITUDE

<sup>1</sup> *Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.*

<sup>2</sup> *Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*

<sup>3</sup> *Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

<sup>4</sup> *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

<sup>5</sup> *For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*  
(Psalm 100, NRSV)

When I was a senior in high school, I had to memorize quotes from *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. I remember the night before the big exam, poring over the text of *King Lear*, searching for the shortest quote of substance I could find. Even though my motives were not good in choosing the quote, I've never forgotten the gist of it. It's a line from Act I, spoken by Lear to his daughter, Goneril. He bellows, "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, more hideous when thou showest thee in a child than the sea monster." What a great and powerful image. Ingratitude as a marble-hearted fiend, more hideous than a sea monster. I might add that this is a handy quote to have up your sleeve whenever you feel slighted. Colleen and I like to quote it whenever we do something especially nice for Matthew that he fails to appreciate. Somehow saying this in a loud, indignant voice seems to make us feel better.

Whether or not you memorize the line, I think we can all relate to Shakespeare's point. Ingratitude offends and hurts the giver. When someone takes the time to be thoughtful or helpful only to have it accepted in a thankless manner, it hurts, sometimes deeply. The opposite holds true as well. When someone takes the time to say thank you, the time to offer a gracious pat on the back, it can raise our spirits tremendously. I believe that *giving* thanks helps us just as much as *receiving* thanks. The simple act of thanksgiving is one of the primary purposes of our worship. As people of faith, we gather together, week after week, year after year, generation after generation, to offer our thanks to God.

The Pilgrims, our spiritual forebears, set the bar high in this category. They gave thanks no matter how grim the circumstances. I tend to think that if I had been in their shoes, in those initial bleak years, I would have fallen into the marble-hearted fiend category. The persecution that forced their move here was certainly no cause for celebration. England had denied them the freedom to worship God as they saw fit. As we all learned in elementary school, their voyage across the stormy Atlantic was treacherous, and the ones who survived the trip found themselves unprepared to face the hardships of a New England winter. After all, it was December 23 before construction began on their new village.

It was during that first grueling winter that half of them died, and at one time only seven of them were healthy enough to take care of the rest. When spring finally arrived, the Wamapanoag tribe befriended the fledgling colony, and advised them on fishing,

hunting, and growing crops suitable to the area. What a blessing their friendship with these Native Americans proved to be. That autumn, the Pilgrims rejoiced at their abundant harvest and prepared a feast of thanksgiving to God for the many blessings they had experienced. They invited their new friends to join in their celebration. And while there was no parade to watch that morning, and no football game that afternoon, their feast lasted for three days.

Regardless of the conditions, feast or famine, the Pilgrims always took time to worship God. In their time together I can picture them using Psalm 100. They used Henry Ainsworth's translation of the Psalms, which says:

*Showt to Jehovah, al the earth.  
Serve ye Jehovah with gladness:  
before him come with singing-merth.  
Know, that Jehovah he God is.*

*Its he that made us, not wee;  
his folk, and sheep of his feeding.  
O with confession enter yee  
his gates, his courtyards with praising:*

*Confess to him, bless ye his name.  
Because Jehovah he good is:  
his mercy ever is the same;  
and his faith, unto al ages*

([www.plimoth.org](http://www.plimoth.org)).

You have to admire the Pilgrims for their thankfulness. After all, it's not easy to be thankful after enduring so much: persecution in England, a horrific trip to the New World, famine and blizzards, disease and death. And yet somehow, they managed to keep their faith in tact. Perhaps it was because their faith was what had brought them here in the first place. These were the people who were willing to be outcasts from their families, their society, and their homeland for the freedom to worship God as they saw fit. They were followers of Jesus Christ who believed that God remained faithful in good times and bad, in persecution and freedom, in famine and in plenty.

They are our spiritual ancestors, these Plymouth Congregationalists. Their faith and courage can inspire us today. Regardless of how difficult life became, the Pilgrims took the time to count their blessings.

Counting our blessings today is not difficult. We all know we live in a great country, where we enjoy freedom and prosperity unimagined by most of the world. We know we are surrounded by people who love us. We know we live in neighborhoods with little crime and terrific schools, warm homes and full refrigerators. We know we belong to a loving church with a wonderful Sunday School for our children and a magnificent choir.

We know all of this, and yet we all carry burdens as well. Some of us are missing loved ones this season. Some of us feel lonely or depressed. We live with the knowledge that our economy is suffering, our nation is contemplating war, and that terrorism remains a threat. During these difficult times, let us be thankful that we can turn to God for the nourishment we need.

When God sought solidarity with the human race in the person of Jesus Christ, we were given a human portrayal of our living God. When we look to the Gospels, to “the human face of God,” we find that God can nourish us no matter what our outward circumstances. Like Jesus feeding people’s souls with his wonderful teachings, God can feed our spirits through prayer and meditation. Like Jesus healing the disabled, God can heal our wounded hearts. Like Jesus gathering children in his arms, God can comfort us when we despair.

When we become intentional in our listening, God’s Spirit can bring to our minds and hearts any number of things, perhaps a line from a song, perhaps a way we can help others, perhaps a passage of scripture. For me recently it was Psalm 100 and the familiar refrain that: **“The Lord is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness to all generations.”** These words remind us that no matter what evil swirls around us, that God is still good, that God’s love will hold us close, and that God will remain faithful to us even if we can’t possibly see it at the moment. It reminds us of God’s faithfulness to all generations. From the Israelites to the Pilgrims to those of us sitting in this room today.

With God’s help, we can meet violence with mercy and evil with love. With God’s help we can nurture an outlook of gratitude, a mind-set of thankfulness. With God’s help we can find cause for hope that is more than cock-eyed optimism. For our faith teaches us that God accompanies us. That God is ever near and ever working in our lives to bring purpose and meaning beyond our wildest dreams. And for that we can all give thanks. AMEN.

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, we praise you for the order and constancy of nature; for the beauty and bounty of the earth; for day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest; and for the varied splendor of each season. We give you thanks for the comfort and joy of life, for our neighborhoods and our homes, for our families and our friends, and especially for our country where we can be free to live as we see fit.

We offer our humble hearts to you O God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, p. 534)