

1 March 2020

From Debt to Gift
Philippians 1:1-11

The Apostle Paul usually began his letters with gratitude. We read one of those passages today in Philippians chapter 1, verses 1-11:

I Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

There's a lovely little poem by Judith Viorst that I included in the March newsletter, but it's worth reading aloud as we begin our Lenten journey into gratitude. It's called "Thank You Note," and it goes like this:

I wanted small pierced earrings (gold).
You gave me slippers (gray).
My mother said that she would scold
Unless I wrote to say
How much I liked them.

Not much.

You understand, don't you? How many of you remember being sat down by a parent and forced to write thank you notes on Christmas morning? It's a chore, isn't it? And it doesn't matter if the gift fits or is useful or will ever be played with – in short, whether you're grateful for it – the note still goes out. It's simply an obligation, like eating Brussels sprouts or brushing your teeth. But that feels wrong, doesn't it? Gratitude as a grudging duty? And sometimes it's even worse than that. I'm sure you never had this sort of thought, but when I was child forced to write thank you notes, at least one of my motivations was that if I didn't do a good job – you know, really spread it on thick – I might not get anything from that person next year. So my note wasn't just a chore; it was a transaction. Sure, I was expressing gratitude, but I expected a return on my card-writing investment.

Those selfish kids, right? Uh-huh, let's not get smug, because we adults are just as susceptible to transactional gratitude as a chore. We still might find ourselves going down a list after a birthday and dutifully marking names off one card at a time. And we still might write those thank yous for at least partially selfish motives – not wanting to offend so-and-so. Diana Butler Bass begins her book on gratitude with a story. One day she got a card in the mail and opened it. It was a note from an acquaintance, expressing her thanks for the lovely thank you card that Bass had sent her the week before. What are you supposed to do with that? Write a thank you? And where does that end?

A more interesting question, though, is why in the world did that person feel the need to write a thank-you-for-the-thank-you? What possible motivation could she have had? Now, I obviously don't know that person, so all I can give you is a guess, but here it is. I think it was about keeping Bass in debt, making sure that she (the card-writer) maintained the advantage. Again, I may be wronging this anonymous person, who may just be a lovely woman with too much time on her hands, but the reason my mind went where it did is because that's the adult version of transactional gratitude: we keep score. We even use the language of commerce: "I owe you one" and a "debt of gratitude." Think about that. A debt is a transaction, which implies several things. It suggests that so long as the debt is outstanding, the person you owe has something over you. It also suggests that people might do things for others entirely to place them at that disadvantage, to put them in debt. Which, of course, does happen, doesn't it? The leadership guru Stephen Covey describes this in thoroughly transactional language. He calls it "making deposits" with other people – because there may come a time when you need those people on your side. Generosity as an investment.



Is that what gratitude is? Part of a complicated dance of giving and receiving favors and trying to keep ahead of others in the balance of gratitude? Too often, yes, and it's nothing new. The Latin word from which we get the word "gratitude" is *gratis*, and in ancient Rome that word was used to describe the complex system of reciprocity called Patronage. Roman society was organized like a pyramid, with the emperor at the top granting land and position to the nobles, in return for which they owed him *gratis* – taxes, tributes, loyalty, service in war, and return favors. Those nobles, then, distributed gifts to the next lower tier, soldiers and merchants and minor landowners, in return for *their gratis*, all the way down to the poorest people, who were desperately dependent on the "generosity" of those above them and consequently owed their *gratis* all the way to the top. *Gratis* was not optional in Rome. Not showing proper "gratitude" to your benefactors above you could lead to imprisonment or even execution. So gratitude has always been susceptible to becoming an obligation.

Fortunately, there is another way. Despite the calculated currency that the Romans turned *gratis* into, that's not all the word means. *Gratis* is also the root of our English word, "grace," and grace is the opposite of a transaction. It is something that is given just because. Think back to the reading we started with from Philippians. Paul – writing from prison – begins by telling the church at Philippi how grateful he is for them. And what specifically does he say he's

thankful for? For their “sharing in the good news” with him; for the way that they “hold him in their hearts”; for the way that they have shared his hardships and, in standing firm for Christ, have confirmed the truth of the gospel. Notice that none of these things benefit Paul himself in any tangible way. The fact that they are standing firm in the gospel is not going to get him out of prison or make his stay any more comfortable. So why does he bother to write his thanks to them? Because *God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus*. Paul isn’t writing a thank you note for anything that they have done for him. He is writing a spontaneous burst of gratitude that they are the people that they are and that he gets to be their friend. Now that’s a thank you note worth holding on to – which the church obviously did.

As we think this Lent about gratitude, I’m going to be challenging us all to take some steps upward in our practice of thankfulness. Today, the challenge is to start thinking of gratitude not as a payment for services rendered but as a spontaneous gift that you can give others – and God – for no personal reason at all. Yes, I suppose we should still write thank you notes when people give us gifts or have us over for dinner or something. I can’t not do that; my Grandmother Morris would haunt me. But I do wonder this: “Why are those the only thank you notes I ever write?” There are people all over the country, and world, for whom I am grateful in the way that Paul is grateful for the Philippians. I should show *that* kind of gratitude, and my challenge this week is to begin thinking about those who have given you those greater gifts of love and friendship and shared faith, and then doing something about it.