

May 28 Gratitude

Colossians 3:12-17

One reason so many of us love dogs is their ability to be happy and grateful for every treat, every bit of attention. We live in a culture that much of the time seeks to drive us toward ingratitude instead of being appreciative of what we have. We are taught to be dissatisfied if: our car is too old, the service we receive is not spectacular and on and on. After all we deserve the best all of the time! We complain when we don't get it and, when it comes our way, we accept it as our due. God has instead called on us to cultivate a spirit of gratitude more like that of our dogs, a spirit of gratitude at all times and in all circumstances.

Here is my quote for the day: "A dog is grateful for what is, which I am finding to be the soundest kind of wisdom and a very good theology." (Carrie Newcomer, singer)

Here is what Myrna Mantle has to say about her dog: I have always had a dog in my life...and they have taught me many things. Great name...spelled backwards ...GOD!!! My current companion is TAQUITA....she has taught me to (1) have a forgiving spirit... (2) always ready with a kiss... (3) enjoy each and every day...

In our scripture today Paul is challenging the people of Colossae to live a Christ-filled life. In the passage just before what we read we are told to take off, like old dirty clothes, the negative things of life. Paul lists many things, I will share just a few: anger, rage, obscene language, and greed. He has a longer list and you can look at your lives and also see what you need to let go of if you are to live a life filled with Christ. Then he tells us to instead put on, like clean clothes, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We are to be tolerant and forgiving and, most of all, we are to put on love. Then he goes on to talk about gratitude. We are to sing to God with gratitude in our hearts. Whatever we do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks, or another translation, be grateful to God.

Think about it, whatever we are to do, in speech or action, we are to do it in Jesus' name and give thanks. We are to be grateful, no matter what the experiences of life. This is something a dog teaches us. We had a little sheltie who was my constant

companion. We had a morning ritual. When I had cereal for breakfast she knew that the last few drops of milk in the bowl were hers. She was not a dog to beg. She just sat at my feet looking up with expectation until she heard the spoon hitting the bottom of the bowl. Then she would carefully place her paw on my foot, just a reminder that she was there. After licking the bowl clean she would always bump my leg and wag her tail, wanting me to see how grateful she was. No matter how many times the routine was repeated she always was grateful.

Someone once posed the following: Picture a gratitude meter where on one side you would put the label ungrateful and spiteful and on the other side would be the label grateful and loving. Ask yourself, if you were to look at yesterday or today where would you place yourself on the “gratitude meter?” Some of the time we would celebrate that we were far to the right, we were filled with love, we had put on the new clothes of Christ and we were singing songs of gratitude! But other times, when we are honest with ourselves, life just knocks the gratitude right out of us and our responses would probably be far to the left. But most of the time we would likely be somewhere in the middle, kind of grateful, giving thanks to God, when we think about it, and trying to be loving. Each day we have to ask ourselves, in comparison to the dog in our life, or who was in our life, are we doing as well as them? Putting our life on a gratitude meter is a good exercise.

This should lead us to the following: What choices can you make that would move you higher on the scale today. Laurie Kern talks about her dog Junior. She got him from a rescue group at a reduced rate because he was 11 and no one wanted an old dog. She had him for seven years. Junior taught Laurie that age has no boundaries and the value and wisdom that come with it cannot be replaced with the beauty of youth. That kind of view of life would help any of us improve our gratitude index.

The last question is: “How can you do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God?” Tom Mulhern gave me a poster that will help with this. I can’t read all of what a dog teaches us because some of it isn’t fit for 10:00 on a Sunday morning.

First of all, they can teach us to celebrate the moment believing that this moment is awesome. From the poster: a dog teaches us that when we go out into the world remember always to take time to smell the roses, and trees, grass, fire hydrants...

Some of what causes our gratitude meter to go down is how we compare this moment with the rest of life. We think about other experiences we have had or others have had. It goes back to the old question, when you see a glass half filled with water do you see a glass half full or a glass half empty? When we compare this moment with others in the past we are seeing life half empty. Is this restaurant as good as the one we ate in last time? Is our wait person as good? Or we think about our experiences compared to others. Did they or we have a better time? Is their car better than ours? And so the list goes on. All of this compare and contrast creates a sense of entitlement and robs us of gratitude. It can lead to some of those filthy rags we are told to take off like greed and anger. To do all in and for God and give thanks means that you focus on this moment. What is happening now is often pretty awesome. We are in worship today. We will visit with friends. We woke up in a bed with a roof over our heads. You get the idea. And even when life is challenging, to focus on the moment helps us to see the positives. Yes, we have heard bad news from the doctor but we have family to support us.

Dogs never worry about the next treat, the next walk or compare this walk to one last week and sit down complaining because it isn't as good. No, they celebrate the experiences of life right now.

Our dogs also bring a trust in life. Our poster: always give people a friendly greeting. Because they trust us they assume the best, that we are going to love them, feed them, and walk them. They are rarely disappointed. We have too much distrust about life. Yes, there are people who do bad things. We hear about the scammers and the burglars and all the rest. But when we really think about it they are a small proportion of the pool of humanity. And most of the time we find people to be kind and trustworthy. Think about how many times we read in the newspaper praise from people thanking strangers for helping them when they have fallen, returning purses or wallets with all of the money in it, or other acts of kindness. To live life with a sense of trust

leads to gratitude. Yes, we need to be careful, to a point, but it has been my experience that I am only occasionally disappointed when I put my trust in the goodness of others. The more we trust, the higher our gratitude meter because we see how good life and people are.

Dogs teach us to know we are loved. Our poster tells us: If it's not wet and sloppy, it's not a real kiss! In our married life, Jenny and I have had the pleasure of having three dogs bless us with their love and one other who was with us a short time. In ending I thought I would share with you their pictures. These dogs never doubted that we loved them. They assumed they were loved and acted accordingly.

Too often in my ministry I experience people who question whether God loves them. They have heard too much about the God of wrath and punishment to trust. Just recently, I was at the Irrigation Festival parade. It saddened me that a church in town decided that this was the proper venue to espouse their view that God is a God of wrath and judgement. We were subjected to signs and speeches from this group telling us that God hates certain people and will punish them. They told us that God will punish us too if we don't believe. They tried to make it sound as if this was how all Christians believe. I wanted to get up and walk beside them and yell, "Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!" Too many people assume God's response to us is one of punishment first and love only after we behave. I believe Jesus came to share a different understanding. Jesus presented a God of love, of caring of compassion. A God who wants us to know we are loved.

When we trust the one who loves us we can feel gratitude. "A dog is grateful for what is, which I am finding to be the soundest kind of wisdom and a very good theology." That is the best theology for all of us.

I hope you have enjoyed learning from our four legged canine theologians. Start sending me cat pictures, stories and quotes. I will be talking about them in August.