

The Structure of Faith, Part 5

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Matthew 7:7-12

Crowds were milling all around Jesus when he walked up a hillside, gathered his disciples, and began to teach them. He taught them to live the life of God's kingdom: a life of trust and of obedience, a life of witness and of humility, a life of integrity, a life of prayer. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. Here is a small portion from Matthew 7:

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. Because everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and to everyone who knocks it will be opened. Who among you, whose son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish will give him a snake? If you know how to give good gifts to your children, though you are evil, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! So, in everything, whatever you want people to do for you, do that for them. Because this is the Law and the Prophets.

1 Peter 2:9-12

In the second half of the first century, Peter the Apostle wrote to the Christian community scattered across the eastern Roman Empire. "You are resident aliens," he wrote, "exiles and foreigners." "You are new-born children of God," he wrote, obedient and faithful." And he wrote this:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who belong, so that you may proclaim the surpassing excellence of the one who called you out of darkness into his wondrous light — you, who once were not a people, but now are God's people; you, who were not being shown mercy, but now have been shown mercy.

Friends, I urge you, while you are living in exile, to abandon the cravings of the old way of life, which war against the soul. Conduct yourselves among the natives in such a way that, even though they accuse you of wrong-doing, they may see the good you do and praise God on the day when God comes.

Children's Story

Every morning, Mrs. Balderdash made a big pot of oatmeal. And every morning, she took her big pot of oatmeal down to the Bleaker Street Shelter to feed the homeless women and men and children who gathered there.

She dipped her ladle into the pot to serve each person. One ladle-full for each woman. One ladle-full for each man. One ladle-full for each girl. One ladle-full for each boy. One ladle-full of homemade oatmeal for each person.

All the women and men and children loved Mrs. Balderdash's oatmeal. "It sticks to your ribs," they said. Not that her oatmeal was sticky, just that it satisfied a person's hunger for a good while.

The women and men and children who gathered at the Bleaker Street Shelter tried to find ways to say thank you to Mrs. Balderdash.

Some of them did just that; they said, "Thank you" to her. One of them took the empty oatmeal pot into the kitchen and washed it out for her. And one of them carried all the supplies back to her car.

But before any of that, one little girl brought her empty bowl back up to Mrs. Balderdash and said, "May I have some more, please? It's delicious." Mrs. Balderdash smiled. The little girl had found a very good way to say thank you.

Sermon

My faith begins by recognizing the mess I'm in, that my life and the world in which I live it are not the way they're supposed to be. The optimist says, "The world is as good as it can be!" The pessimist says, "The

world is as good as it can be.” My faith says, “The world as it is is not the way it’s supposed to be; I’m not the way I’m supposed to be either.” But my faith doesn’t stop there.

My faith embraces what God has done in Jesus Christ, what God continues to do through the Holy Spirit, and what God will finish doing on the last day, all to put the world right and to put me right, too. My faith knows what God has had in mind from the beginning. Knows not because I’ve figured it out, but because God has revealed it. The Bible is an account of what God has revealed. My faith is convinced that God will accomplish his intentions. Convinced not because of deductions or arguments or emotions, but because of Jesus Christ. Jesus went all the way to the cross for the sake of God’s intentions to put everything right. My faith has assurance that God has included me in his plan. Assurance not because I can’t imagine it or won’t imagine it any other way, but because the Spirit of God has created faith in my heart and given me a new birth. And my faith trusts Jesus to lead me like a good shepherd. Trusts not that the way will be easy, the pastures always green, the water always abundant, but that Jesus will never leave me, never forsake me, and that if I have to die with him, I will also be raised with him.

My faith recognizes the mess. My faith embraces God’s way of putting everything right. And my faith — here’s today’s focus — my faith is a constant expression of thanks, of gratitude, to God for everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen to put the world, and me in it, right. My faith, if it is genuine faith, has everything to do with gratitude.

It’s worth our time, then, to wonder a little about gratitude. Gratitude, it seems to me, is a necessary component of human relations. Think about it. When gratitude is absent from human relations, we know it right away. We can tell something is missing, something is “off.” Either people are doing nothing to help each other out, showing no ordinary kindnesses never mind exceptional ones, or people have no appreciation for anything that’s done for them. Whether people are given no reason to be grateful or have no sense of gratitude, something is definitely wrong, something that belongs is missing.

King Lear was well on his way to madness when he said it, and what he lamented was in too many ways his own doing, but we sense the core truth when he says, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / to have a thankless child.” Those of us who are parents know that little stuns and disappoints us more than when our children are ungrateful. It’s not first of all about what they owe to us for our help, for our care, for our kindnesses. It’s not about the wound we feel from their ingratitude, not first of all. No. What stuns and disappoints us is the sense that a son or daughter of ours is somehow deficient in a core human attitude and behavior. To be grateful is to be truly human. To be an “ingrate” is to fall short in a foundational way.

Gratitude is not only a necessary component in human relations, it is at the heart of our relationship with God. Gratitude is a response, a response of appreciation for kindnesses shown, for benefits received. Gratitude is a right and fitting response to the God who blesses us.

Now, think about this. If my faith recognizes the mess that the world is in and that I’m in, that we’re all in exile far from where we truly belong; and if my faith embraces God’s solution to the mess and the misery: a plan, promises, and a Savior; then can my faith be anything but an expression of gratitude to God? Gratitude to God for setting me free from sin and misery, for forgiving me and putting things right between me and God? Gratitude for good gifts — faith itself, new life, hope, peace, and many more — all of it through the good gift of the Holy Spirit?

My faith, if it is genuine faith, has everything to do with gratitude. More than anything, I want to show my gratitude to God. How can I do that?

It begins with prayer. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, prayer is the most important part of gratitude. All sorts of things could be said about prayer, so much more than I could fit into a sermon, so much more than I myself have even begun to know. For today, I’ll keep it to two things.

First, prayer is an expression of gratitude. The very act of praying, not the content — the very act of praying is an expression of gratitude for the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.

The other day, Martha came home from school overflowing with things to tell me. She poured it all out, the words rushing this way and that. She moved from one story to the next. She doubled back to add missing details. Then the flood was over. And she said, “Thanks for listening, Dad. I feel better.” She meant what she said. She really did feel better, and she was thankful. As for the listening part, I didn’t have much choice: I

couldn't get a word in! And that was okay. It was a time for me just to listen, to be a steady, reliable presence in her life. And when she said, "Thanks, I feel better," I felt better, too. Because the bonds of mutual love were secure and even a little stronger than before.

Sometimes prayer is like that, jabbering away to God, pouring out my heart, the act itself an expression of gratitude for God's listening ear. And then there's another kind of prayer, the grateful prayer that asks for more.

When Jan makes an especially delicious pot of beef barley soup, I can show my appreciation, my gratitude, in a number of ways. I can say, "Why would anyone want to go out to a restaurant, when food like this keeps coming up night after night?!" Or I can ask her how she managed to draw the flavors out of all the ingredients so well. I can say, "Just sit there. I'll do the picking up." Or I can say, "More, please." That's one of the ways we show gratitude to God for his good gifts, by asking for more.

It reminds me of Moses. Moses stood on holy ground before the burning bush and heard the voice of the LORD. Moses saw all of the LORD's amazing deeds in Egypt from a front-row seat. Moses climbed the mountain and received stone tablets etched by the finger of God. Moses, with the elders, ate and drank on the mountain and saw the God of Israel. After all that, Moses still wanted more. "Show me your glory," he prayed. Moses wanted more of the good things God had given him. Moses wanted more of God himself. (I won't spoil the rest of the story. You can read it in Exodus 33-34.)

The Heidelberg Catechism encourages us, in gratitude, to pray for God's gifts of grace and the Holy Spirit. Grace and the Holy Spirit. Those are gifts we already have. But in gratitude we pray, "More, please."

This is really the focus of the instruction Jesus gives in that portion of the Sermon on the Mount we heard today. "Ask, seek, knock," Jesus says. This is about prayer. The One we ask, the One from whom we seek, the One on whose door we knock, is God. And what we're after is . . . the kingdom of God. We're after the culmination of God's plans and actions. We're after the completion of every blessing that we have tasted so far only in part. And on the way, we're after more of what we taste every day. We want to experience God as our faithful Father every day. That is what we ask for. That is what we want more of. And to want more of God, to want to know God more deeply, more fully, to want God himself the way Moses wanted God, that is gratitude. And that is the heart of all prayer.

If I want to show my gratitude to God, it begins with prayer, but it doesn't end there. When I pray for God's Holy Spirit, I'm praying for my own transformation. The Sermon on the Mount is about new life, the life of God's coming kingdom. I pray for the Spirit so that I can begin to live that new life now, so I can begin — I said last week — to become fluent in Danish while I'm still living in Haiti, so I can begin to speak and act in this broken, miserable world according to the renewal and the glory that are coming.

Some of this is very mundane, not at all extraordinary, universally figured out: "Whatever you want people to do for you, do that for them." That's just part of being a decent human being, isn't it? It's hardly profound. But what a profound difference it would make if we all lived that way! And I pray for the Spirit so I can live that way, so I can overcome my selfish inclinations and do what's decent.

But the transformation runs deeper. It needs to run deeper. God gave Jesus and God gives the Spirit for the sake of death and resurrection. Jesus died to conquer the power of sin. The Spirit raised Jesus to give him victory over death. By the Spirit and through faith, I am united with Christ in his death and raised with him to new life. And it's simply a matter of gratitude to embrace the new gift (life!) while rejecting the old way (misery and exile!). But it's not easy, so I pray for the Spirit. Because the "cravings of the old way of life" — that's how Peter puts it — the "cravings of the old way of life . . . war against [my] soul," against the new life that has been born in me. It's a war. It's that serious.

I've been troubled for a long time by the warlike and vengeful attitude in some of Scripture, especially some of the psalms. I've wanted to replace the harsh, bitter language with mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The psalmist, in particular, has seemed too wrapped up in himself, too overblown in his reactions to his enemies. And those psalms have seemed useless to me. And I've wondered why people for centuries have treasured them.

Well, last week — why it took so long, I don't know; many of you may have arrived there already long ago — but finally last week, I suddenly understood an important way in which those psalms speak. (This is why it's important to stick with Scripture, to keep reading it, even if you don't get it, even if it rubs you the

wrong way, to keep reading it year after year.) I suddenly understood that those troublesome psalms offer me a way to pray against my worst enemies. My worst enemies, which are sin, my own sinful nature, and evil spiritual powers (the devil, if you will). Enemies which show up as the cravings of my old way of life. Enemies which don't want new life to take deep root in me. Enemies which want me to fall back again and again, to stumble into the same blind alleys over and over. And so I pray, I pray for the Spirit over and over again, day after day saying to God, "Thank you for faith. Thank you for the Spirit. More, please. More, please."

And we have this assurance: God hears the prayers of his grateful children, and God gives us what we most need. If we know how to give good gifts, how much more does God! So we pray, and we do battle in the power of the Spirit. Because God has called us out of darkness into light. And because God ends our exile through Jesus Christ to prepare us for life in his kingdom.