

Give Thanks
Selected Scriptures
November 19, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
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With Thanksgiving approaching, an old hymn has been running through my mind. If you know it, feel free to join in.

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings – name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your blessings, see what God has done.
Count your blessings, name them one by one.
Count your many blessings see what God has done.*

When you put it that way, it seems so simple. Turn your mind and your heart from what is going wrong in your life to all that is going right. It will put your current troubles in the proper perspective. You won't be in the pit of despair anymore.

There is a lot to be said for this approach. Reframing our circumstances – thinking about them in a broader context – can help us find peace. It can help us find contentment. Maybe even joy. Count your blessings.

The Bible agrees. It says in several places, "Give thanks to the Lord, for God is God. God's steadfast love endures forever." The psalmist sings, "Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to God with psalms." The Prophet Isaiah instructs us, "Give thanks to the Lord. Call on God's name.... For God has done glorious things. Let this be known throughout the earth."

These admonitions toward gratitude are not confined to the Hebrew scriptures. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes, "Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In the Book of James, we read, "Every good and perfect give is from above." Give thanks in all things. Count your blessings. Count them one by one. This is good advice, and it is good theology, too. Be aware of all that God has done for you. Turn your heart toward gratitude.

But I have to tell you that sometimes "count your blessings" feels not just simple, but simplistic. Sometimes, where we are in life is just too much to bear. You may have seen a poem we posted this week to the church Facebook page. It just stopped my heart. This poem is titled, "Watching My Friend Pretend Her Heart Isn't Breaking," by Rosemary Wahtola Trommer.

On Earth, just a teaspoon of neutron star
would weigh six billion tons. Six billion tons
equals the collective weight of every animal

on Earth. Including the insects. Times three.
Six billion tons sounds impossible
until I consider how it is to swallow grief –
just a teaspoon, and one might as well have consumed
a neutron star. How dense it is,
how it carries inside it the memory of collapse.
how difficult it is to move then.
How impossible to believe that anything
could lift that weight.

There are many reasons to treat each other
with great tenderness. One is
the sheer miracle that we are here together
on a planet surrounded by dying stars.
One is that we cannot see what
anyone else has swallowed.

This is such an exquisite sharing of deep grief, something we all have felt, or will feel. And into this sacred space, someone will surely tread too heavily. Someone with good intentions will intrude to say, “Oh honey, just count your blessings.” There is an impossible distance between the sheer weight of the loss described in this poem and the easy answer of gratitude, prescribed by someone who is not feeling that loss. When you have swallowed a teaspoon of grief, when your heart itself is breaking, no one gets to tell you how to feel.

But the Bible does offer us a glimpse – not advice, not a prescription – but just the merest whisper of gratitude, even in the face of catastrophic loss. It says, “For the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Here is Jesus facing betrayal and torture and a horrible, public death, and the Bible says he gave thanks – he gave thanks before he broke the bread one last time for his friends. We might think of this as a mere formality – table grace, something we say by rote. But I think not. I think that Jesus knew it was his last night in this earthly life, and he was grateful for the gift of it, so he said thanks to the Father for this brief life, thanks for simple food, thanks for friends.

May God give us all the grace to find gratitude in the good times of our lives, to recognize the gifts God has given us. And in the darkest times of our lives, the times when we are weighed down beyond our ability to bear, may we find just enough space in our hearts to feel God’s loving presence around us and to say, even then, “Thanks be to God.”

Amen