

Praying Your Gratitude

[Psalm 118:19-29](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Have you ever noticed that some people have more than their share of problems but always seem to be so content and thankful? Others have relatively easy lives but seem never to be content or thankful. That is because gratitude has nothing to do with the circumstances of life and everything to do with your vision of God. If you have trouble being thankful, it isn't new circumstances you need. It is a new vision of God.

Throughout the Sundays of Lent, our sermons have focused on the call to pray the psalms. We have looked at how the psalms guide us in praying about our thirst, confusion, fear, hope, work and now our gratitude. The psalms were the ancient worship book of the Hebrews and the Early Church. Children were taught to memorize the words. In times of trouble these prayers would immediately begin to roll off their tongues and they would find themselves in communion with their God. Sometimes they would pray the psalms, and sometimes they would sing them, which is only another way to pray.

Today's psalm, 118, belongs to a group known as the Hallel or praise psalms. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Those words from Psalm 118 were as familiar to the Hebrews as the hymns, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," or "Holy, Holy, Holy" are to us. They were said especially during the festive seasons of Passover.

So it is no surprise that when Jesus entered Jerusalem during Passover, the crowd began to sing this hymn once again, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," "Bind the festal procession with branches." They had probably been singing it for a while, just as they had done at each Passover. However, the gospels make it clear that Jesus didn't just happen to ride into Jerusalem when a crowd was standing by the road singing Psalm 118. No, the people were clearly singing their thanksgiving to Jesus because they had seen what he had done in his ministry. Perhaps in that crowd was Zacheaus who had been forgiven his sins or blind Bartemeaus who had been given his sight. Or Lazarus who had returned from the dead. All of them healed by the miraculous working hands of Jesus. And the people were grateful for the grace they received. This is the first kind of gratitude, responsive gratitude, to which the Bible calls us.

Responsive gratitude demonstrates that we are paying attention to the blessings of life. Like the people who lined the streets in the Palm Sunday parade, we realize that Jesus has been good to us and so we come to church to join the festal procession of those who give thanks. As many of you know, I was recently hospitalized. The first night I was in a double room with a man I knew nothing about. I spent much of that night worried about the intense pain in my leg and chest. The next morning I overheard my roommate tell his family that the doctors had decided to amputate his leg. Suddenly my complaint turned to thanksgiving. You don't have to be particularly spiritual to learn how to offer responsive thanksgiving. You just have to pay attention. It could be a lot worse. It is a lot worse for someone. Always, there is someone else who has it a whole lot worse.

But as obvious as that seems, I am always amazed by how many people refuse to give thanks. They choose instead to focus upon their loss, their hurt, what life has not given them. But that is their choice. Complaint is not natural < neither is gratitude. What is natural is that life will often hurt. What comes next is up to you. You can respond by either complaining or giving thanks. Those who choose gratitude choose not to be victims. They choose to determine their own response to the disappointments of life and they choose to defy their disappointments by finding reason to give thanks. It doesn't matter how critical, or boring, or unpredictable the circumstances of life become, your last freedom is to determine your response. Don't give that up. Don't dare allow the circumstances to take over for you. Insist on your God-given freedom to choose your response to life. Choose gratitude. If for no other reason than because it feels better than whining. It certainly feels better to those around you.

But, responsive gratitude is only the first step in learning how to conduct a spiritual life. If you stay with the psalms, if you keep praying them, eventually they will teach you a deeper, more profound form of gratitude to God. That is creative gratitude.

Creative gratitude does not wait for circumstances to set an agenda to which we respond. It doesn't wait to see what the world will come up with next for you and then challenge you to find a reason still to be grateful. Rather, creative gratitude is world-creating. It subverts the pain-filled world we read about in the papers and the pain-filled lives we see in the mirror by insisting on giving praise to a God not done with creation.

Remember that these Hallel psalms were sung at Passover - the identity-creating event for the Hebrew, when God freed them from slavery and brought them through the Red Sea. In the Exodus, God miraculously changed the way it is. He overthrew the most powerful nation in the world to create hope for those who had no hope. So the Psalms do not teach us simply to find some reason to give thanks while still being slaves. They don't tell us to give thanks since things could always be worse. And they don't teach us to be contented slaves to our addictions, pain, and hurt. No, they call us to envision another way of life because as Passover reminds us God can change the way it is! That is ultimately why we are thankful.

Thus, the Psalms are always subversive literature. "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone (verse 22)." The Hebrews sang this as they approached the temple. A people who were rejected were given a place in the world and a place to worship. When the Hebrews worshiped and gave thanks to God, this small nation surrounded by powerful empires was proclaiming the possibility of a different world.

So thanksgiving has the power not just to recognize the blessings of God, but to proclaim a blessedly different way of life. For example when the twelfth century began in France, Medieval Europe was filled with reasons to be very afraid. Plagues would periodically ravage the population. The Muslims were invading from the East and had already taken half of Spain. The new monarchies were shaky and locked in struggle with Rome, the church was badly in need of reform, and the economy was still feudal. In the midst of all these reasons to despair, the Abbot of the Monastery Church in St. Denis discovered a new, grateful vision of heaven on earth. Abbot Suger had the audacity to reconstruct his church with a new architectural form we now call Gothic. In building the Gothic cathedral, Suger and his architects were creating a vision of heaven on earth with pointed vaults that could reach up to the sky. Flying buttresses allowed for thin walls adorned with large windows to let light into the church. Eventually, Rosette windows and stained glass were added. All of it was revolutionary, not just architecturally, but culturally. The Gothic cathedral made an incredible claim that heaven had descended into earth. God was with us and anything was now possible. Over the next hundred years other revolutions followed in science, technology, politics and theology. That's because when people believe heaven and earth have met they become grateful and creative again.

So the gratitude of an anonymous monastic abbot helped create another world. As it did when Frederick Douglass stood in this pulpit and declared his gratitude that blacks were created free, long before slavery was abolished. As it did when the churches of East Germany declared their gratitude that they were free in Christ, long before the Berlin wall was torn down.

At the basis of all these new world-creating visions was the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. According to Matthew and Mark, he himself quoted Psalm 118 reminding the people that the stone the builders rejected had become the cornerstone. Again, that was subversive language. Jesus was claiming that he was now the temple, the meeting place with God.

If you can see that, if you can see that in Jesus Christ you have a meeting place with God, then your heart is filled with gratitude. It doesn't matter how awful or despairing life may seem, your thanksgiving refuses to honor the disappointments of the present. It doesn't take the disappointments seriously because the present will not last. In Christ anything can happen, for heaven and earth have met.

When we read the newspapers, when we receive the bad lab report from the doctor, when we lose our

jobs, and when we get confused and lost along life's path, we declare our faith by insisting on a creative gratitude. This gratitude envisions a whole new way of life for a Savior who has ridden into our lives. Anything can happen! "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Heavenly Father, give us the vision of your Holy Spirit to live our lives as an expression of gratitude. Grateful not only in response to the blessings we see, but most of all for the arrival of our Savior Jesus Christ who will bring the blessings we cannot see. Amen.