

With Gratitude in Your Hearts
Colossians 3: 12-17
Jon Frost

Each year when a group from Westminster visits the Estado 29 home for children, on our last night together we have what is called *la despedida* or “the goodbye.” It sounds simple enough but calling it “the goodbye” hardly does it justice. It isn’t just a goodbye - it’s more of an event, really, that takes on an almost sacramental significance, where the cafeteria floor we are standing on suddenly becomes holy ground.

During this goodbye event, we share in a delicious feast together of carne asada, freshly made flour tortillas, guacamole, rice, and salsa. With our taste buds still rejoicing we sing songs that have filled that place with praise and laughter throughout the week.

But the central act on that night is the exchange of thanksgiving. Various children stand before the gathered group and express their gratitude for our group coming, for playing with them, and for sharing our love. Then, members of our group will do the same, thanking the community for their hospitality, for their patience, and for sharing their love with us. And pretty much the whole time, there are streams of tears flowing down everyone’s face in a weird combination of sobbing and laughing.

I remember experiencing this the first time I visited the community as a college student and it totally took me by surprise. It was as if I had no idea until that moment of expressing and receiving gratitude with these friends I had made just how powerfully my heart had been touched. Slowly, under the surface of the silly songs we sing and the goofy games we play, a sense of gratitude takes hold in the deepest parts of our selves and on our last night together we suddenly become aware of the profound gift we have been given.

Author and historian Diana Butler Bass defines gratitude as the capacity to recognize the abundance of gifts that surrounds us. I like this definition because it acknowledges the possibility that when we look at our lives, we might not see this abundance of gifts. There is a sense in which gratitude entails a choice on our part and that living out of a sense of gratitude is a distinct alternative to the way of the dominant culture. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes to a community desperately trying to live the way of Jesus as a distinct alternative to the dominant culture fueled and perpetuated by the imperial power of Rome. Through and through, this letter is a subversive critique of the powers of empire and of the inherently violent and competitive world the empire creates.

In the midst of that, the Christian community is called to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. They must bear with one another and forgive one another. And why? Because the Lord has first forgiven them as

verse 13 explicitly says. But more implicitly is the fact that in this entire section they are being called to the very pattern of life that God demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ. Every virtue Paul calls this particular community to has been supremely modeled in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the sake of the entire world. The way of Jesus is a grateful response to the initiating love and mercy of God. God has made the first move and we respond. In these six verses, three different times and in three different ways Paul urges the Colossians to be thankful. When thankful individuals begin to act as a thankful community, amazing things happen.

Each month I participate in a conference call with the Honduras mission network, a group of folks representing congregations, presbyteries, and organizations associated with the PCUSA doing work in Honduras. At the beginning of August, we were made aware of a critical medical situation. Eduar Guadalupe Lopez, the 12 year old son of a pastor of one of the Presbyterian churches in Honduras had a heart condition since he was young that had gone untreated and was reaching the critical point where surgery was necessary.

Pastors in Honduras do not receive a salary, and many congregations struggle to support families in normal circumstances, let alone in major crises. Over the next couple of months a widespread fundraising effort took place among the Honduran mission network as well as congregations in Honduras and Eduar's surgery was scheduled to take place on October 4th.

The reports from the successful surgery that came back were simply amazing. I will share comments from an email by PCUSA mission co-worker Dori Hjalmarson:

"This little boy with such a sweet manner is completely transformed. He has some pain in recovery, but is not suffering as he was. I hadn't realized before the surgery just how painful and exhausting his heart condition had been. His heart, which was visibly beating out of his chest, is now calm and quiet. He no longer gets winded climbing stairs. He sleeps through the night and no longer has a chronic cough and fatigue. Today was one of those days I am exceedingly grateful to be part of the body of Christ and able to witness true faith and companionship."

She went on to share that Eduar's surgeon is the only pediatric cardiac surgeon working in Honduras and his team has only been operating since 2016. He marveled at the fact that Eduar survived this long with his condition. The pediatric cardiologist who treated Eduar is one of two in the country and had actually treated him as a baby in the public hospital before studying in Mexico and returning to Honduras. The three attending physicians at the hospital waived their fees. So many people moved heaven and earth to care for this boy. It was gratitude in action. Everyone involved and everyone who witnessed it was humbled at the abundance of gifts that kept showing up throughout the whole experience. It is a beautiful thing to behold when God's people collectively live out of gratitude. Lives are literally transformed.

The importance of a healthy heart cannot be overstated. I immediately thought of this story when reading this passage because two different times Paul hints at the fact that the gospel must take root in our hearts to truly transform us. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” “With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” When we speak of the heart, we often associate it with our emotions. It is the place within us where we feel joy or sadness. Throughout Scripture the word “heart” has a different and perhaps broader meaning.

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes that in the Bible to speak of the heart is to speak of “the center of our being from which our life flows. It is what gives orientation to everything we do.” The church is therefore not just a community of people who feel grateful on occasion. We are a community whose very identity, whose entire way of being in the world is marked by gratitude through and through. It is as if there is a constant soundtrack of gratitude playing in the background as we go about our daily lives. With gratitude in our hearts, thanksgiving is our constant song.

And it is so desperately needed today. Gratitude is no less countercultural in our day than it was in the 1st century. In a culture of excess and consumerism gratitude says enough - I have all that I need. In a culture which breeds suspicion of anyone who is different than me and suggests that they are a threat to me and what I have, gratitude says enough - there is plenty for us all. In a culture which breeds competition and incites the lust for power, gratitude says enough - let us sit at table and break bread together. Let us share the good gifts of God that are meant for everyone. This is what God has done in Christ and it is what we are called to do for the world. Amen.

Resources

Walsh, Brian J., and Sylvia C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed Subverting the Empire*. InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. HarperOne, 2018.