

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Matthew 25:31-46

"Thank God for God"

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts

be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen

During the month of October (and then into November due to the October Nor'easter), a dozen men met in our Church Dining Room Saturday after Saturday to discuss a book we read together, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words* by Brian McLaren. We met to talk and to pray, and we did both faithfully.

In *Naked Spirituality*, Rev. McLaren offers 12 words that can be the start of simple, one-sentence prayers. McLaren's goal is to give us straightforward, common words as sort of "prayer starters" to make it easy to say down-to-earth but meaningful prayers throughout the day. He offers just 12 words to inspire these one-sentence prayers—prayers that are, in his words, "simple, do-able and durable."

McLaren's 12 words are:

Here, Thanks, O, Sorry, Help, Please, When, No, Why, Behold, Yes

(and the final one is silence...).

As the weeks unfolded and the men, committed and true, met every Saturday, I noticed that some of us paused sometimes when we were to start a prayer with one of the words. A few of the words presented a bit of a struggle...however, we never paused or had trouble with the one-sentence prayers that began with the word Thanks.

It is Thanksgiving week and I think people of faith and people in general don't struggle too much with feeling grateful. The local newspaper and a few of the journals and magazines we get at home have been featuring famous and ordinary people saying what they are thankful for this Thanksgiving. Words of appreciation fall easily from our lips and that is a good thing.

I could offer a long list of what I feel PROFOUNDLY grateful for this Thanksgiving...my family, my Church, all of you, my health, and the list goes on and on.

But this Thanksgiving I want to draw our attention to being thankful for God.

This year I want us to Thank God for God.

Furthermore, I want us to imagine our lives without God.

Picture it...you minus God.

What are you like?

What is your life like?

Picture this...you minus the Church.

What are you like?

What is your life like?

I think thanking God for God is a useful exercise. It helps us realize the many ways that God has shaped and continues to shape our lives.

I think thanking God for God makes us notice the ways God gives our lives purpose, direction and meaning.

I think thanking God for God makes us aware that God, believing in God, being committed to God, and serving God have made us better people.

When I picture my life minus God, it is not such a pretty picture. I have a tendency to be self-involved, indulgent and materialistic. Here's an example: people often refer to malls as anonymous, corporate, superficial, blight-on-the-landscape entities. But (now here's a confession) I like malls. I like getting a cup of coffee and people-watching, I like window shopping, I like actual shopping, I like bargains and sales. My life minus God has me at the mall all too often wandering around with a vacant but contented look on my face.

But because I try hard to keep God at the center of my life, I believe I am called to serve...to work hard at my ministry, to dedicate myself to this Church and to service, to work for peace and social justice. I am thankful that God elevates me from my more base instincts and my love for God and my motivation to follow Jesus keep me from visiting the mall daily or eating bon-bons on my couch while I watch TV.

This week, as we celebrate Thanksgiving I intend to thank God for God. My life minus God is far more shallow, me-focused, indulgent and trivial.

My life with God has direction, purpose and meaning.

What does your life look like when you picture YOU minus GOD??

Do you have visions of you eating pints of Ben and Jerry's ice cream in front of American Idol? I actually think that is a good activity ON OCCASION. But with God at the center of our lives, American Idol becomes a brief diversion sandwiched between our other meaningful activities which include serving, helping, listening, praying, vigiling, organizing, singing, worshiping, and creating.

Faith is a verb, or it should be.

God calls us to action.

God gets us off the couch.

God makes demands.

God makes our lives better.

God makes us better people.

Some of you know that I edited a book on the Psalms, so I know the Book of Psalms in the Bible fairly well, and I know some of the 150 Psalms by heart. What amazes and touches me is the number of Psalms that simply praise God for being God and thank God for God.

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

Psalm 9:1, 2

We give thanks to you, O God;
we give thanks; your name is near.
People tell of your wondrous deeds.

Psalm 75:1

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;

to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night...

Psalm 92: 1, 2

Those are just a FEW examples...Psalms of praise and thanksgiving abound in Scripture...Psalm 95, 96, 98, 99 and the list goes on and on.

For generations, more than that, for millennia, people have said THANK GOD FOR GOD. Our ancient brothers and sisters in Palestine raised their voices, their prayers, their lyres and their tambourines and sang praises to God, thanking God for being God and for being in their lives. We are not the first. We stand in a long line of our foremothers and forefathers in the faith saying Thank God for God.

And so let us return one last time to the picture of you minus God.

I ask again, what is your life like?

What are your days like?

How do you make decisions, how do you fight self-indulgence, how do you stretch yourself to be generous, how do you find ways to focus on others?

My life minus God is not such a good life. It is an easier life, it is a less busy life, it is a less stressful life, but it is not a good life-because God nudges me to be my best self, not my most self-focused, indulgent or decadent self. God lifts me up and nudges me forward. There is an expression that God "leads by pushing," and it's a good thing. God pushes me off the couch toward things that involve giving, doing, and creating-things that have at their core justice, service, compassion, love, peace and generosity.

Today's Scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew includes these words:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

This Thanksgiving, not only am I saying Thank God for God, but I am also saying Thank God for Scripture...because Scriptural passages like this one help me to be a better person. This is a passage I know and love, and Thank you God, I have just enough Scripture in me to keep me off the couch for most of the day.

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

I have this and just enough Scripture inside me to keep me volunteering and visiting, helping and serving, caring and giving...Thank God for God.

I have spent YEARS volunteering at prisons-at the Ludlow Prison, at the Hampshire County Jail in Northampton. It was this passage that, years ago, made me put on my clerical collar, drive over to the Ludlow prison, sit across the glass window from an inmate and talk on the phone with our hands on the window as if we could touch. It was this passage that made me put on my collar and drive to the Hampshire jail and sit in a cold room and wait endlessly to see an inmate and talk and pray and provide hope when there seemed to be no hope.

Thank God for God. Visiting jails and praying with prisoners is good and important work and it makes a difference and it is hard. The visits are long and much of the time you are waiting, after your pat-down, with nothing to read or look at, and it is boring and chilly and doors slam and lock behind you, and it is scary and lonely. Thank God for God. Thank God for Scripture. Because Scripture gets me off the couch and in the car and off to the jail again and again....

I was in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Thank God for God. Otherwise I would be reading a lot of People magazines while eating red licorice and Cheetos.

But I am like you, and we have enough God in us, and enough Scripture in us to drag our weary bones off the couch and head to the jail, or to visit shut-ins like you do, or volunteer at the Cot Shelter program like you do, or to cook dinner for Cathedral in the

Night like you did in a Nor'easter, or rake leave here at the Church like you did yesterday.

We have enough of God in us, and enough Scripture in us to spend SOME down-time on the couch reading People magazine with bags of red licorice and Cheetos, but we don't spend a lifetime doing that.

Picture your life minus God. Picture your life minus this Church.

This Thanksgiving I am saying, with all my heart:

Thank God for God.

Thank God for this Church.

This Thanksgiving I am grateful that God is at the center of my life, and that YOU are a part of my life. God inspires me to be my best self...at least for a good part of the time...and you keep me honest, motivated and strong.

Thank God for God.

Thank God for you.

And thank God for the Psalmist who had the wisdom to write,

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

3 Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

5 For the Lord is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.