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Praying With the Stars VII. Thanks!

2 Corinthians 9:1-6 *(as adapted from Eugene Peterson's translation The Message)*
If I wrote any more on this relief offering for the poor Christians, I'd be repeating myself. I know you're on board and ready to go. I've been bragging about you all through Macedonia province, telling them, "Achaia province has been ready to go on this since last year." Your enthusiasm by now has spread to most of them. Now I'm sending the brothers to make sure you're ready, as I said you would be, so my bragging won't turn out to be just so much hot air. If some Macedonians and I happened to drop in on you and found you weren't prepared, we'd all be pretty red-faced-you and us-for acting so sure of ourselves. So to make sure there will be no slipup, I've recruited these brothers as an advance team to get you and your promised offering all ready before I get there. I want you to have all the time you need to make this offering in your own way. I don't want anything forced or hurried at the last minute.... God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done.... This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.... This relief offering is a prod to live at your very best, showing your gratitude to God by being openly obedient to the plain meaning of the Message of Christ. You show your gratitude through your generous offerings to your needy brothers and sisters, and really toward everyone. Meanwhile, moved by the extravagance of God in your lives, they'll respond by praying for you in passionate intercession for whatever you need. Thank God for this gift, his gift. No language can praise it enough!

Have you ever noticed how many images in the Bible have to do with agriculture? There are three-dozen occurrences of the word "seed" in the New Testament, and numerous stories about planting and sowing. Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. Pastor Katherine's sermon last week used one of Jesus' other parables to remind us, again with an agricultural image, that our life's

habits must be well-fertilized if we are to truly bloom. In fact, both Testaments are full of agricultural images that are meant to say something about God and about the Christian life. And that isn't so surprising, is it? For the two millennia during which the Bible was composed was an agricultural era, and unlike today, 90+ percent of folks got their food from farming. Now, if the gospel writers and Paul were writing today, they might choose different images, different metaphors that might reflect more the increasingly urban and technological culture that we live in. But I suspect that something would get lost; I just can't imagine, for example, that a comparison of, say, the Kingdom of God to a backed-up hard drive would be nearly so evocative or poetic!

And today's scripture – whose evocative earthiness is so well-captured by Eugene Petersen's translation – is yet another agricultural image, where Paul compares God's generosity to that of a farmer sowing his or her seeds. And in one of the lines that I left out of the reading for reasons of space, Paul concludes that image with a rather un-subtle reminder: "*A stingy planter gets a stingy crop.*" Now why would Paul write such a thing in such a pointed way? Well, remember what we know about the church at Corinth. First, they were always squabbling and fighting; Paul is constantly mediating their arguments. But, secondly, it is also nonetheless clear that Paul had a special affection for this sometimes fractious bunch in Corinth – precisely **because** their squabbles showed that they did not take their new Christian faith lightly! Their conflicts showed that getting things right and behaving *well* mattered a great deal to them. And so they argued about those things instead of glossing them over. And Paul, who could be more than a bit argumentative himself at times, saw in these folks people like him – folks who fought sometimes because the stakes were high and the answers truly

mattered. And that must have given Paul pleasure.

But Paul also knew that when push came to shove, and after all the squabbling and contention were done with and after everyone had aired their differences and Paul responded to them and called them to a course of action – the Corinthians would again and again and again display their underlying unity in a striking way: by their support of those less fortunate, through their gifts to an offering to help those in other places who were struggling. As Paul put it in our reading this morning: *“I know you're on board and ready to go.”* But at the same time, Paul also knew that the **anxiety** about offering what we have to the world – Is it enough? Will we still have enough for us? Will it do any good? – can sometimes make us, well, stingier than we meant to be.

And yet I understand that anxiety, don't you?!? Think about it: All, **everything**, that a farmer in that day and time had lay in that bag of seeds in his or her hand. If those seeds proved to be weak then the next year would be lean and full of suffering. If those seeds failed to grow, then there would not only be nothing to eat next year but there would be no future seed for the following years. Everything – **everything** – about the future was staked on the efficacy of that bag of seeds. And so, *understandably*, the farmer would be tempted to hold some back or scatter his or her seeds sparingly. Because, after all, it takes a huge amount of sheer courage to take your future life and livelihood in your hands and strew it on the ground – in the **trust** and confidence that there will indeed be abundant results, that the future will thereby be assured, that life will continue to go forward.

But even in the midst of their anxiety, Paul knows that that little church can do it.

Paul knows that they have resources that the world needs. And Paul knows, most importantly, that God is a faithful God who causes abundance to bloom and makes those resources and those gifts do far more than might ever have been imagined. But Paul knows, too, that they like everyone need encouragement. All of us need mutual **encouragement** to continue to faithfully cast our seed with generosity. And so, Paul, says *“I’m sending the brothers ...as an advance team to get you and your promised offering all ready....”*

Now, how does all of this relate to our sermon series, “Praying With the Stars,” in which we are looking at a number of the prayers in the Bible? Well, you’ll recall that I told you that these last three sermons of this series would also take a look at writer Anne Lamott’s new book about prayer, entitled Help, Thanks, Wow. She says that these are the “three essential prayers” for any Christian life. Two weeks ago our topic was “Help!” and today our topic is “Thanks,” and Lamott powerfully shows how that prayer of “Thanks!” is indeed related to our having experienced generosity and our from being generous. And, in fact, near the end of our scripture passage for today, that’s also exactly what Paul says, isn’t it, when notes that so very often the response to the generosity that we offer to others is what he calls “pray[ers] of passionate intercession.” Put more simply, the experience of being the *recipient* of generosity makes us want to pray “thanks!” But even more importantly, as you and I deepen our Christian maturity, we will discover that the experience of being generous ourselves to others makes us more prayerful, more at peace, and more inclined to want to be even more generous, even less “stingy,” more and more able to overcome the anxiety that sometimes grips

us.

That's really part of Lamott's point when she says "Saying and meaning 'Thanks' leads to a crazy thought: What more can I give?"¹ How does that work? Well, listen to what Lamott has to say about what gratitude feels like to us on many occasions:

...most of the time for me gratitude is a rush of relief that I dodged a bullet— the highway patrol guy didn't notice me speed by, or the dog didn't get hit by someone else speeding by. Or "Oh my God, thank you thank you thank you" that it was all a dream, my child didn't drown, I didn't pick up a drink or appear on Oprah in [my] underpants.... These are all DEFCON 1 moments of relief and gratitude worth giving God thanks.²

And yet that sort of gratitude, that sort of praying, isn't the deepest place that a Christian can go. In fact, things become more complex when life gives us, as every life will, experiences that are not so clearly good, but oh-so-mixed, or even just plain awful. What is it that we are saying "thank you" for in such situations? There are some things in and of themselves that simply are not good, are heart-rending, even, that would be better if they had never been. Neither Lamott nor the Apostle Paul is counseling the masochistic practice of being thankful for such things in and of themselves.

In fact, let us linger on this point for just a moment. You may recall that elsewhere in one of his letters, Paul says this: "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances....*" Now, please notice something crucial here; I want

¹Lamott, Anne (2012-11-13). Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers (p. 62). Riverhead Hardcover. Kindle Edition.

²Ibid. pp. 43-44

you to please notice what Paul **doesn't** say. He doesn't say "Give thanks **for** all circumstances." He doesn't say "*Give thanks **because of** every circumstance.*" No, that little preposition makes a powerful point: giving thanks ***in the midst*** of all circumstances is very, very different sometimes than giving thanks **for** those circumstances themselves. Every one of us has done things, for example, that we wish we could take back, that made us ashamed, that were far from our best. And, hopefully, every one of us has also learned from those experiences, they've made us better persons, they helped us do better next time. And so we can indeed end up being thankful for what came out of those circumstances, for how God was with us through them, for how God kept calling us to be better people. But that's very different from being thankful **for** the circumstances themselves. In short, even in the midst of the most awful things that life can bring our way, we can be thankful **in the midst of** those things that God is there, working for the good that is possible. But that's different from being thankful **for** the circumstance itself.

And a huge part of what we can be thankful for in the midst of life's hard things is that we do not go through them alone. No, for as Lamott says, we

...say "Thanks," because [we have been shown] things that ...are miserable but that prayer and friends help [us] find a way through; or that are painful... in ways that make your heart ache, that draw you closer forever to the comrades who have walked with you.³

And then what happens? Well, let's hear from Lamott one more time:

³Ibid. p. 53

Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It... makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and in the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back.⁴

In Petersen's translation of Paul's words, he says that he's "sending the brothers" to the Corinthians to help encourage them. And what Lamott is pointing out is that our prayers of thanksgiving almost always point us back to the fact that God has indeed sent us brothers – and sisters, and parents, and children, and aunts and uncles, and pastors, and friends – to help us through this life, to encourage us, to find us amidst the hard things, and to call us back when we have lost our way. How can we not want to pray "Thank you! Thank you!" for such a thing? And then how can we not want ourselves, in turn, to be that very sort of person who also both gives and gives thanks for that opportunity?

My friends, who are those folks for you? Who have been the ones who have walked with you through hard things, for whom you find yourselves profoundly grateful even if you wish those hard things had never had to be? I hope your prayers this week indeed include a hearty "Thanks!" for those folks. And who among your friends or family or acquaintances is in need of you to be generous with your time, your counsel, your wisdom, your presence? Can you find some of those folks this week? Can you show to them what has been shown to you? For Paul was right: "God can pour on the

⁴Ibid. pp. 56-57

blessings in astonishing ways....so that you can be generous in every way....” For that good news, let our prayer indeed be “Thanks!”