

Kailua Christian Church
Message: The Living Room Campfire
Sunday, November 26, 2023
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scriptures:

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing[a] in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written,

“He scatters abroad; he gives to the poor; his righteousness[b] endures forever.”

10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.[c] 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you[d] glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your partnership with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus[a] was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” 14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus’s[b] feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine? 18 Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” 19 Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Sermon: The Living Room Campfire

This passage from Luke seems a bit ridiculous. If you’ve just been miraculously healed of the worst illness you’ve ever had, wouldn’t it just come almost instinctively to go saythank you to the One who did the healing? Yet, nine out of ten of the healed lepers didn’t come back to thank Jesus. How could that be?

I tried to imagine what was going through the lepers' heads as they transformed in their healing, since it wasn't obviously to go thank the Healer. I imagine that their healing gave them new goals for things to do that weren't possible before. They may have been thinking – oh, I need to go hug my kids now! I need to get back to work! There's so many things I can do now that I couldn't before and now I must go do them.

And that's not so hard to imagine, right? When we've been given a new opportunity, or a big change has happened to us, we're naturally wired to drive through to the next stage, or figure out how to course correct if that change was negative. Our human anxieties and our need to captain our futures overtake our need to pause for gratitude. I can personally tell you, as an ambitious personality myself, I often forget to pause and find places of gratitude.

Because of my impatience and unwillingness to pause in gratitude, I was called out by some refugees I was working with. I worked in my native Seattle for a year between leaving the Middle East and coming to Hawaii, where I managed the refugee employment program for the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia. My job was to train refugees in work readiness and find them jobs. One time, I went to a Sudanese family's house to take the mother to an interview for hotel service work. I was already running late and praying that she would be ready and walk out the door quickly. However, when I walked into their home, I was greeted by the whole family sitting around a fire pit they'd built in the living room where they were cooking homemade injera bread on a griddle.

“Sit down and eat!” she insisted. My anxiety went through the roof – first of all, there's surely no way their landlord approved this activity, and secondly, we are already late, we don't have time for this. I attempted to scold her for not paying attention to punctuality, and she looked at me bewildered and hurt. “I am grateful for you. I wanted to make you some bread.” Startled by her response, my heart broke and I sat down to eat the best homemade bread I've ever had, around that haphazard campfire in the middle of an apartment living room.

And yes, we were late. No, she didn't get the job. Yes, it ruined my business relationship with that hotel.

This event happened over and over again the first several months I was on that job. I would show up to the refugee's house and they would be busy cooking me something and insist I sit down and enjoy it before we left. And then we would be late. And they wouldn't get the job.

I learned I had to show up 20 minutes early to refugee houses and anticipate the ritual of being lavishly fed with homemade breads and soups and roasts before I was allowed to take them anywhere. And that worked out better for everyone, except for my waistline.

You see, the refugees came from cultures that honored spaces of gratitude in the thick of the timelines and ambitions we make for ourselves every day. They insisted that I rest with them in that place of gratitude rather than rushing through it, and it left me with

this incredible experience of watching cooking practices and trying new dishes from all over the world. In those 20 minute spaces of gratitude I learned new things about Africa and South America and the Middle East, or I learned more about their families and stories, or music, and such a range of other wonderful things. It was such a blessing to get to travel the world through those 20 extra minutes spent around living room campfires. More importantly, it provided space for me to listen to them and be their pastor instead of simply their case manager forcing them into a menial minimum wage job that they didn't want. It gave me the true opportunity to see them, which was more important than any agenda I had planned for them that day.

We have to intentionally carve out spaces for gratitude to each other and to God rather than skip right into the goals we have for ourselves and our futures. I can imagine that the lepers with their newfound freedoms in healing forgot to carve out that space. And I imagine that many of us in this room forget to carve out that space, too.

It's easy to remember that gratitude in retrospect, after the Big Goal has been completed and you've had the chance to reflect on it in your rearview mirror. But Jesus asks us to remember to take the space to reflect with gratitude right when you're in the thick of it. He asks us to put aside that 20 minutes before rushing between appointments to sit with those walking with us on the journey and be grateful for them.

Jesus knows it's hard to stop and be grateful for those walking with us when we're in the thick of it. Any of us who are parents know that it's hard to be grateful to your partner when the baby is crying and the dishes are piled up and there's bills to pay. Sometimes your partner can seem like the enemy rather than your ally when all that is happening. It's hard to be grateful to your coworkers when a deadline is due and pieces of the project are not finalized. It was hard to be grateful to the refugees when they were making me late and ruining business opportunities with their stalling behaviors. It was hard for them to be grateful for me when I'm trying to rush them into a terrifying new life in a new world while not taking the time to understand them. Jesus knows it's hard to be grateful when you're in the middle of a Goal and you don't have the clarity of hindsight to recognize all those places of love and care that you were given along the way.

I want you to think about the Big Goal that you're trying to get to in your life right now, the thing in your life that you're working on but haven't fully actualized. Maybe it's overcoming a health concern, or healing a relationship, or a project at work. Maybe it's anticipation of all the building blocks we have to put together to save this church. I want you to imagine yourself stepping back from that goal and sitting around whatever your equivalent to the living room campfire is. The living room campfire – which I must mention, please don't do that in a literal sense – is the place where you sit down and recognize God and those people He's placed in your life that have helped you walk along this journey to The Big Goal.

Jesus asks us to sit down around the metaphorical living room campfire and be grateful in the thick of our journey, not just in hindsight. If we forget to acknowledge His boundless grace and the gifts he's placed into those helping us when we're in the thick

of it, we risk losing our direction and wandering away from His goal for us, which is always better than our own. Ambition without pause to reflect with gratitude can be ruinous, because it tears apart the very thing we're trying to build. If we don't stop to appreciate our partners when the baby is crying, that partnership can eventually end in divorce. If we don't stop to listen to the stories of the refugees, there's no way they can trust us to put them in menial jobs they don't want.

Probably none of those refugees are still in those entry level jobs I placed them in 8 years ago. Yet, probably all of them remember the case managers who came to sit with them and listen to their stories and acknowledge their humanity.

In all our goals, we have to remember God's goal of healing and uniting humankind in His service. And to remember God's goal, we have to pause at that campfire in the thick of our journeys and be present with our gratitude for Him and the helpers He has placed in our paths.

As we move into our mutual goal of reviving this church, I want you to know how grateful I am for all of you. I'm grateful for this church's ability to ask important questions and be flexible about learning. I'm grateful for this church's steadfast and united belief that Jesus is our Lord who came to save us. I'm grateful for this church's quietly effective presence in walking alongside the aggrieved and suffering among us. I'm grateful for this church's resolve to honor its history and founders, while also being attentive to the wind of the Spirit moving in a new thing.

I'm grateful to Nani for being a joyful pillar for this community. I'm grateful to Lowell for his candor and straightforwardness. I'm grateful to Jenny for her servant heart. I'm grateful to Aaron for his sense of awe and wonder. I'm grateful to June for her intellectual passion. I'm grateful to Florence for her fortitude. I'm grateful to each of you for the gifts you bring to this church, and in this sacred pause, I am grateful to God for instilling all these gifts in you.

I'm grateful to those Sudanese refugees so many years ago for teaching me how to pause around that living room campfire. As we move into a time of reviewing our mission and budget today for 2024, I invite you into sacred pause for the gratitude you have for those around you and the gratitude you have for God's boundless grace in creating this space for us together. I invite you into gratitude about where we are right here, right now, in the thick of it, and may that gratitude direct you toward Him and His goal for your own precious life and our precious life together in this church.

Amen.