

## ***Living Gratefully***

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11  
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Sunday, June 13, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Shortly after I decided on my sermon title, I realized it sounded familiar. Had I read it somewhere? Was it a title of a book or movie? So I “googled” it and discovered websites that use that title or something similar. My title? ***Living Gratefully***. On the Internet, I found this website: *The Year of Living Gratefully*. I believe I read about this website before. It’s dedicated to helping people “achieve their happiness potential.” The upshot of “Living Gratefully” is that you pledge to find five things you are happy about each day. The result? You should begin to feel more happy, since you realize you have so many different things for which you are grateful. You can even comment on that website’s blog about your “gratitude victories.” A second website was similar to the first. It’s called *Gratefully Living*. Again, folks submit what they are grateful for in life. You can view all their submissions in alphabetical order, from “Aunt Sally” to “Ziggy Marley” (which is someone’s pet cat).

I can see the usefulness of such an exercise, particularly for folks who tend to see their glass half empty rather than half full. Writing down the things, people, and situations for which you are grateful each day could give you a new outlook on life. But **I** wanted to use that title, “Living Gratefully,” for ***my sermon***, and I think “living gratefully” is something much more than what those websites propose. While it’s a nice idea to jot things down for which you give thanks, I submit that exercise is not so much “living gratefully” as “**LISTING** gratefully.” So I jot things down, submit them on the website with a click, and there you have it, the extent of my gratitude.

Now, let me tell you why I call my sermon ***Living Gratefully***. I do so because the woman in our Gospel story who enters the dinner party uninvited, washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries off Jesus’ feet with her hair, and then anoints them with expensive oils, is living gratefully. She is not just jotting down on a piece of parchment a few words about what makes her happy, but rather, she is acting out, living out, in a fully generous way all her joy and thankfulness. Now, that’s living gratefully.

Luke has, of course, jotted down for the reader of his Gospel the reason she is grateful. We learn at the start she was a sinner. You’ll often hear in commentaries or sermons that she was a prostitute. Luke doesn’t tell us that. He just says she was a sinner. We also learn from Luke that she was forgiven by Jesus, and that she had faith.

Did you notice? Luke lets us in on a little secret—Simon, the host of the dinner, doesn't think much of the woman, and doesn't think much of Jesus for letting that woman do what she did. Jesus knows Simon is thinking these judgmental things. And because he knows what Simon is thinking, Jesus offers a story about a creditor who forgave two people who owed him money. One person owed him much more money than the other, but the creditor forgave the debt of both. Jesus asked Simon which of the debtors would love him more. Simon guessed the answer rightly—the one who was forgiven more would love the merciful creditor more.

The woman, like the one debtor in the parable, is grateful because she knows how great a debt of sin she carried, and how great and generous was Jesus' forgiveness. Jesus himself states that when he says, "...her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." Her gratitude, lavishly acted out in loving care of Jesus, was directly proportional to the amount of sin that needed to be forgiven and the amount of forgiveness lavishly given to her by a loving God. So, we learn some things about this woman.

Now, what can we learn about Simon here? We learn he is a Pharisee—thus very proper in his dealings with people and things in daily life so that he stay ritually clean for worship in the synagogue. He is a Pharisee—thus very interested in hearing what this Jesus has to say about the kingdom of God. No wonder he invited Jesus to his home for a meal. Simon is curious. He's heard this Jesus might be a prophet like Elijah or Moses. Then we learn Simon makes judgments ... quickly. It isn't long before he's decided Jesus could not possibly be a prophet, else he would not have allowed a sinner, an unclean woman, to touch him like that. We also learn that Simon's judgments last: While Jesus has forgiven the woman, Simon has not. In Simon's eyes she is and will always be a sinner.

Look even more deeply into the story, and we also learn this about Simon: Simon does not live gratefully. Oh, he might live "properly" and go about his daily tasks adequately, but all within certain limits. He hosts a dinner, but his hospitality is mediocre at best. He welcomes Jesus into his home, but only perfunctorily, not generously. Maybe Simon ought to log onto that website and take The Year of Living Gratefully challenge. It would do Simon good if he would consider what he is grateful for, jot down a thing or two. Only maybe he wouldn't have anything to jot down. See, Jesus reminds Simon how ungrateful he's appeared all evening—not offering gracious hospitality, not welcoming Jesus the way this woman did. Jesus implies here that Simon doesn't recognize his need for forgiveness, even though it's being offered to him by Jesus. Simon is oblivious to his own sinfulness—but so quick to notice others'—thus how in the world could he ever know joy in the freedom that comes with debts erased? No, Simon does not live gratefully, and what's more, cannot even **list** gratefully. He just exists, and one wonders if daily life for Simon is more drudgery and disappointment than anything else.

Pastor, professor, and writer M. Craig Barnes sums up the difference between Simon and the unnamed woman perfectly. Barnes, senior pastor at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, says that he frequently ends worship services each week by saying something like, "Every day this week you have to decide if you

want to achieve your life or receive it. If you make achieving your goal, your constant companion will be complaint, because you will never achieve enough. If you make receiving the goal, your constant companion will be gratitude for all that God is achieving in your life.”

Simon doesn't recognize what new life and possibilities Jesus offers in his person. Simon's goal is to have a successful dinner with a prophet present. And he's annoyed when the woman disrupts his precious dinner. He's annoyed by Jesus, too. His constant companion here is complaint. The woman, though, is so overjoyed at the new life she has received from Jesus, that she will go to any length to live out her gratitude—even to risking her own self and honor by entering a household where she wasn't invited and where she will be harshly judged, in order to respond to Jesus' love with love. We can only guess where else her gratitude would take her—where else she would show that love in Jesus' name. All we know is that she leaves in peace, her constant companion gratitude.

I suppose it would be easy to forget the couple of verses that come next. Verses about the women who follow Jesus, who give to his ministry out of their own resources, and participate in that ministry. Women healed and forgiven, their demons cast out and diseases cured. But I think Luke places these verses here to remind us that, like that unnamed woman in Simon's home, there are countless examples of people living gratefully because Jesus has given them new life.

Will you and I join them? Can you and I be less concerned about what we might achieve in this world, and more open to what we are receiving, each day, by the grace of God? Forgiveness and strength, wisdom and joy and peace...the list we could list is long. But rather than just listing them, can you and I take those things given to us and live them out?

Dare to enter the world as boldly as that unnamed woman entered that dinner party. Dare to enter the world and care for it, and all the people in it. Dare to love and give of ourselves generously, and extend mercy to others the way it has already been extended to us. Dare to participate in the kingdom of God here and now, our constant companion gratitude. **AMEN.**