

Pastor Charlie:

We welcome you to Worship, Virtual Worship here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. I'm Pastor Charlie and I have the privilege of being one of the pastors of this wonderful church. We're so glad that you've joined us, and we sincerely hope this is a time of inspiration and encouragement for you.

To begin, I'd like to read a couple of passages of scriptures. And as I read these passages, I think you'll quickly discover there's a common theme throughout.

The first comes from the book of Psalms, Psalm 100. Beginning with verse four, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good, and his love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations."

Then I move to the New Testament. I'm going to share the very beginning of First Corinthians, chapter one, verse four. "I always thank my God for you, because of his grace giving you in Jesus Christ."

And then Philippians the very beginning, "I thank my God every time I remember you."

And finally, First Thessalonians, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you." May the Lord add his blessing upon this reading of his holy word. Help us to hear it, understand it, believe it, and then live in response to it. Let's be in an attitude of prayer together.

Lord, we do thank you for this time of worship. This time to come and sing your praises, and thank you for all that you have done and continue to do. And now, Lord, I thank you that you've given me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these, my friends and your servants.

Lord, a task that I cannot do on my own strength. So Lord, I ask you to speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us do receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Would you consider yourself a grateful person? I would say one of my earliest childhood memories was that of my grandfather, Papa, and him praying. And just about every time he would pray, whether it be around the dinner table or just praying with the family, just about every time he would begin his prayers the same way.

"Give us grateful hearts, our Father." I can still hear the sound of his voice. "Give us grateful hearts, our Father." That's not a bad way to begin a prayer. That's not a bad way to begin your day. In fact, that's not a bad way to begin anything. You can begin with thanksgiving and prayer.

The power of gratitude, the attitude of gratitude. It is a very, very powerful thing. In fact, you notice in Paul's letters, I think one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul was such an effective minister of the gospel, who wrote a large part of the New Testament, it was because he was a thankful person. He was a grateful person.

In fact, just in the text I read to you just a moment ago, we find that in many of his letters, he would begin with thanks. Every single time, I thank my God for you. I thank my God as I remember you.

And of course we see his admonition to us some First Thessalonians where he says, "In everything, give thanks. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." An attitude of gratitude. Giving thanks.

And to be honest, that's a big part of what we're doing when we come to worship. Even as you watch on your screen or device, or you come to drive in worship, a big part of worship is giving thanks to God. Being grateful to God, giving praise to God. Not just because God is in need of our praise, or deserves our praise, but because being gratitude, having an attitude of gratitude is a very, very healthy thing.

I don't know if you know this, but there is a large body of medical research that says, gratitude makes us more healthy. Physically, and emotionally, and spiritually. An attitude of gratitude can change your mood. It can change your attitude. It can change your life. It can change your relationships. It can change

the way you deal with people at work. It can change the way you deal with people in your family. An attitude of gratitude is a very powerful thing.

I recall experiencing a powerful moment of gratitude and thanksgiving when I was shopping at a mall some years ago. It was Christmas time, and of course the mall was just packed. And I was there alone because I was shopping for Brandy, and I got hungry, and so I headed to the food court. And there were so many tables that were filled with people eating, of course,, during the holiday season.

And so after I got my food, I was looking around trying to find a table so I could sit and eat. And it was tough for me to find one. And I finally found table, I squeezed in and right next to me was this cute little family. And they had a four-year-old girl, I would say about four years old. And the daddy asked her to say a prayer before they ate. They had just sat down as well.

And so this little girl began to pray. And she prayed for everything. She prayed for her dog, she prayed for the cats. She prayed for Rudolph, she prayed for Santa, she prayed for her family. She prayed for her little brother. On and on. She prayed for everything. And a very, very special thing happened as she began to pray. That whole section of tables, our whole section of tables, became quiet.

Right there in the middle of that shopping mall, in that particular section, as that little girl gave thanksgiving to God, there was this sacred silence. And when she ended her prayer, just about everyone had a big smile on their face. Isn't that amazing? Because of that little girl's prayer of thanksgiving, a time of great stress in a shopping mall was replaced with a powerful sense of gratitude.

An attitude of gratitude. Oh, it can make a big difference. And don't you wish you could feel that way more often, a feeling of gratitude in your heart and in your life? It's so easy to fall into a trap of being discouraged about life, isn't it? I mean, we live in a very grumpy world. It's easy to be irritated with people because they don't do what we think they should be doing. It's so easy to get mad at life because it doesn't work out the way we want it to.

It so easy to get discouraged by life. And maybe, as you watch and listen to me now, you want to change that. You're tired of having a sense of discouragement. You're tired of having a heavy heart. You want to have a sense of gratitude. You want to have a sense of joy. You want to walk through life feeling how blessed you are by God. You're tired of being in the depths and in the doldrums.

I want to help you today. Inspired by Paul who tells us that we should give thanks to God and everything he says, give thanks to God because that is the will of God. So inspired by that verse, and inspired by the power of gratitude, I want to help us do that.

If you want a powerful sense of gratitude in your life, I ask you now to remember what you have. To remember what you have. Think about the blessings you have in your life right now, the things that you enjoy. Now, think about your life if they were taken away.

Kent Crockett wrote a great book entitled I Once Was Blind, But Now I Squint. And in that book he tells of his father, who got throat cancer. And he had to go through treatments, cancer treatments, radiation treatments. And through that process, unfortunately, he lost his taste buds. He lost his ability to taste food.

So much so that eating became a chore for him. It was a drudgery. Every single meal, every time he put things into his mouth, it tasted so bland, he could barely swallow it. And the doctor said that his taste buds might return, but he wasn't sure when.

And so the weeks turned into months. And the months turned into several months, and still his taste buds would not return. And eating be continued to be a drudgery. And then one night Ken's father was eating a meal, and he picked up his fork filled with food, and he put it in his mouth. And for the first time in forever, he could taste food.

He was overjoyed. It was the best morsel of food he ever tasted in his life, he thought. He got his taste buds back. And from that moment on, he said to himself, never will I ever take for granted the joy of tasting food.

And of course, Kent said in his book, you don't have to lose your blessings in life in order to develop a taste for them. Just imagine your life without them. Then you'll have a sense of gratitude about your blessings.

But the truth is, if we're honest about the last year of this pandemic, and the Covid experience, we have had our blessings, many of our blessings taken away, haven't we? Maybe it's not our taste buds, but oh, how we miss being able to hug friends. And to connect with one another face-to-face.

Oh, how we miss being able to come into the sanctuary and worship. Oh, how we miss being able to walk into a restaurant and enjoy a meal with friends without having to worry about anything. Oh, how we long for that. How we long to go to a concert, to a sporting event.

Much of that, if not all of that, has been taken away. But there will come that day, hopefully sooner rather than later, when we will be able to do those things again.

And let me ask you, will you ever take for granted the joy of doing those things? When you're able to go back to doing those things, will you ever take for granted the ability to hug another person? Will you ever take for granted again the ability to come and worship in God's house? Will you ever take for granted again the ability and the joy of going to some kind of concert or some outing or event?

I don't think we ever will take it for granted again. Someone once said that the grateful people are those people who don't have to check their bank accounts to see how wealthy they are. You want to have a sense of gratitude in your life that permeates everything that you do? Remember what you have. But I also encourage you to remember who you have.

Think about the loving people in your life, the people that make such a difference to you, the people that you love. The people that you respect, the people who have taught you lessons. The people that you truly love. Now, imagine if those people were not in your life.

There's a great book entitled *A Window on a Mountain* by Winston Pierce. And Winston talks about the time, in that book, when he went to his high school reunion. And he was talking with all his friends, of course, about their experiences of high school, and are remembering all those good times.

And then they got to the subject of their teachers. And Wilson said, one of his classmates said, he remembers Mrs. Wint. He said "She was such a special teacher, not only because she taught me many great lessons in school, but she taught me many great life lessons." And he said, "I wonder whatever became of her? She meant so much to me."

Well, someone suggested that he write a letter to Mrs. Wint to tell her how much she meant to him. Well, you know what? He took that advice, and he wrote a letter. And he sent it to the high school. He wasn't sure where Mrs. Wint was, he knew that she retired many, many years ago.

But eventually that letter found, Mrs. Wint. About a month later, that man received this response.

"My Dear Willie, I can't tell you how much your letter meant to me. I am now in my nineties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals and feeling very lonely. You'll be interested to know that I taught school for 40 years, and yours is the first letter of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue, cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has for years. Willie, you have made my day."

Isn't that something? Who are the people in your life that you love, who you appreciate, who have meant so much to you? Be thankful for them. Why not take the time to call them, or to write them a

note of thanks and tell them how much they mean to you? You never know what a difference it will make.

Remember who you have in your life. I think of just this week, the special people in my life. I am a blessed man. I have so many wonderful people in my life who I love so much, who make such a difference to me. My family, my wife of course. But also in particular, the people in this church.

I know we have a lot of Zoom meetings during this time, and I had two or three this week, for different committees and teams of people. And just this week as I thought about this sermon, and the people I'm grateful for, I would look on the screen, with the faces of all these different people in the church on the Zoom call. And I looked at each one of them, and thanked God for each one.

I know I'm preaching to the choir, so to speak. But oh, how many special people we have in this church, and how grateful I am for them. And I'll never take them for granted. I'll never take you for granted again, especially during this pandemic. Oh, how I miss you. Oh, how your clergy team misses you.

It's just not the same, is it? Being on camera, being on video. And know how I long for the day to be back together again, to connect with you face-to-face.

I'm grateful to you. You want a feeling of gratitude that will change your life? You want a feeling of gratitude that will empower you in your life and make a difference to your mood, to your strength? Remember what you have. Remember who you have. But most of all, remember who has you.

I encourage you sometime today, tonight before you go to bed, to do a little exercise for me. And simply complete this sentence. "If it had not been for God, blank." If it had not been for God, what? Imagine your life if God was not in it. Imagine what your life would be without your faith. Would it be joyless? Would you feel lost? Would you feel meaningless?

Imagine if it had not been for God, what would've happened? Imagine this pandemic without your faith, and without knowing that God was walking with you every step of the way. Imagine your life without God in the midst of that crisis that you've been through lately. Imagine your life without God guiding you and directing you in your life to make the decisions that you have made.

If it had not been for God, what? And you may want to go a step further. As you think about those things, you may want to write those things down in a journal. Because there will come a day when maybe you feel hopeless, and maybe you feel discouraged. And you forget the faithfulness of God. You forget when God has been with you and sustained you, and strengthened you, and guided you in your life.

And you'll be able to turn back to what you wrote, and you will remember that there is hope. Because God has always been faithful to you in the past, and He'll continue to be faithful to you in the future.

I know many of us are looking forward to watching the Super Bowl today. And of course, I know many of us wish the Falcons were in it. But well, that's another sermon, right? But we always enjoy watching the Super Bowl, and aren't we grateful that we actually got to experience football during this pandemic? Yeah, there were empty stadiums, but at least we could watch the game on television.

And tonight we will. We'll watch the big game. Oh, how many of us love football. And as I think about football, I think about one of my all-time favorite movies, *The Blind Side*, based on a true story about a homeless kid named Big Mike, who was taken in by a loving family. They became his legal guardians, and they helped him live out his dream of playing college football, and professional football.

But one of my favorite scenes, probably my favorite scene in that movie happens on Thanksgiving Day. It's just been a couple days since Big Mike has been in their house. And he sees this big, big display of food in the kitchen. He's never seen so much food in his life.

But of course, his new brother and his new sister, they just kind of take it for granted. And then they quickly grab a plate, and they fill their plate with food. And they run off back to the television, to the sofa to watch the football game.

And after everybody has cleared out and gotten their food in the kitchen and filled their plates, there still his Big Mike. And he humbly grabs his plate and he slowly takes a little bit of food here, and a little bit of food there as if he's praying for every piece of food, and thanking God for every piece of food on his plate.

And when he fixes his plate, he doesn't turn towards the television, to the living room. Instead, he goes in the opposite direction and he goes to the dining room. He's never had a dining room to sit in, especially one like that big room with all this fancy stuff, chairs, table. And he sits down by himself with his plate.

Well, his new mom played by Sandra Bullock. She's looking around for Big Mike. He, she doesn't see him in the living room, and then she looks in the dining room. And she sees Big Mike sitting there all by himself. And she's convicted. And so she grabs the remote control, and she turns off the television, and says, "Y'all get up. Follow me into the dining room."

Then the next scene shows the whole family together with Big Mike. And they haven't eaten yet. Instead, they're holding hands around the table, and they're thanking God for their blessings. You see, Big Mike reminded them how blessed they were.

You want an attitude of gratitude? You want a feeling of thanksgiving and praise to God? You want to move from discouragement to joy? Remember what you have, remember who you have, and remember who has you. Let's pray.

Oh Lord, we do give thanks for all our many blessings. Not only do we thank you, Lord, for what you have provided. But Lord, we praise you for your power, for your might, for your love, for your unending grace. Oh Lord, help us to never take for granted those things in our life that we have, that you have provided. May this time of the pandemic teach us to be always grateful, for maybe what we used to take for granted.

It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.