

# “Count Your Blessings or Count Your Burdens”

October 13, 2019 (Thanksgiving)  
Philippians 4: 1-14

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Thanksgiving is not really a religious holiday — it’s a cultural holiday that celebrates the abundance of the harvest, and calls us to remember and give thanks. Yet clearly, gratitude and thanksgiving permeate the Christian faith. It’s impossible to think about our faith without gratitude, because at the heart of our faith is remembering that God created us and loves us, and our only response can be praise and thanksgiving.

Sometimes feelings of gratitude come naturally. It’s lovely when that happens: when something happens that just has us welling up with thanksgiving. We wish moments like that could happen more often because they tend to be so fleeting.

The scripture we read this morning is the last part of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It really points out that being grateful and focusing on the good is something we have to consciously do. The reason that Paul reminds us to rejoice, to not be anxious and to think of the good in life is that we naturally go the other way.

In fact, science has shown that our brains are wired to the negative — to fear, to worry. The fact that our brain goes quickly to fear and worry and ‘fight or flight’ probably helped our more primitive ancestors to survive in a harsh environment, but it’s not helping us much today. We tend towards counting our burdens far more than we count our blessings.

And sometimes it’s no different for people in the church! Yet when we decide to follow Jesus, we discover that one of the ways our faith changes us is in our attitude of gratitude.

We are called, even exhorted to be thankful and to rejoice. It is pretty clear that gratitude is something you need to develop. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk, has said: “*It is not happiness that makes us grateful, it is gratefulness that makes us happy*”.

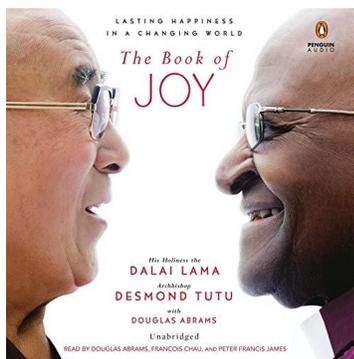
Being filled with gratitude makes us happier and less anxious. There are all sorts of studies that show that thankful people sleep better, exercise more and do more for other people. Who wouldn't want more of that in their lives?

The question is — how do we get it?

Most of us believe that if this situation or that problem was solved – if we had more positive outcomes in life, that we would be more grateful. I will be so happy when ... I am healthier, when I can retire, when I can afford a new car, when this sermon is over (you fill in the blank)! We tend to make our happiness conditional on the situations in life. And there is no question that when some bad situations are made better, we feel better ... but it's fleeting. No sooner is there another problem or challenge on the horizon than we're down in the dumps again.

The truth is that a life that is filled with gratitude is not correlated to a life that is easy and full of blessings. It's pretty clear that having more good things in life does not necessarily make you a more grateful or happier person. You just have to travel a little bit to see the joy and gratitude that exists in some of the poorest parts of the world, and some of the misery, depression and anxiety that exists in the wealthiest parts of the world.

I recently read the book *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*.



The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are in conversation with Douglas Abrams. Those two living saints: the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu are two of the most grateful and joyful individuals you could meet, which is partly why the world is so drawn to each of them.

But neither of them have had easy lives. Desmond Tutu grew up in the Apartheid system in South Africa, and he experienced and witnessed tremendous racism over the course of his life. The Dalai Lama had to flee his native country of Tibet 60 years ago because of brutal oppression by the Chinese, and now lives in exile in northern India. They both profess how important it is to live a life full of gratitude, and they both see it as a practice.

I think that both men practice it so much that they are just full of gratitude! The Archbishop often marvels at how “wonderful” things are—he is genuinely delighted with many simple things in life. Don't you love being around people like that who are delighted by simple things? Having this as a

life view does not keep you from caring about the problems in life: rather it gives you the strength and energy to help make a difference.

I always find it interesting when science backs up what our faith has already said. The apostle Paul in another letter –this time to the Romans says: *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* (Romans 12:2) The idea of renewing your mind, of training and transforming your mind is something Paul talks about. It’s part of the reason he says that we need to focus on what is *“true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and anything worthy of praise”*. Focusing on the good, trains your mind to go there naturally.

From what I understand of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which is one of the most popular forms of therapy, the purpose is to interrupt negative thoughts that are often formed in childhood. Our thought patterns form grooves in the neural pathways of the brain, and we literally have to train the brain to form new pathways with new thought processes. It really is like exercise — the more you cut off the negative talk and the more you change the channel to the positive — to things you are grateful for, the easier it gets.

Last week we talked about how we are called to help others bear their load while we allow others to help us when we need help. In short, we were talking about our interconnectedness.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu often talks about “Ubuntu”. Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is often translated as "I am because we are," but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity".

I love that when we read the letters from Paul we are listening in on real relationships: *“I ask you, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers...”* Gratitude naturally is not self-focused and self-centered. Gratitude acknowledges the help we have received – that we haven’t done and don’t, and can’t, do on our own.

Take coffee for example. We can’t grow it here. Do we give thanks for a cup of coffee and for all those who helped to make it possible to bring it to the table — the farmer and labourers; those who transported the beans, the grocers and then the person who made the coffee in your house? My favourite genre of fiction literature is post-apocalyptic. I just love reading about the times after the crash of most of human civilization. In Margaret Atwood’s latest book *The Testaments*, there is no more coffee – they’re all drinking some horrible coffee substitute! The fact is we see things like coffee as being so ordinary it’s not worth thinking about, but when you actually do think about it you realize how amazing it is that we can take something that travels so far, that so many are involved with, for granted.

We are all interconnected, we are not self-made, and gratitude comes partly from acknowledging that. I remember 12 and a half years ago when I was being interviewed for the position here at Wall Street, one of the members of the interview team asked “If you got the job here, we are concerned that you would end up standing in your father’s shadow. (My father was the senior minister here for 18 years before me). How would you handle that?” And in one of those moments when God gives you just the right answer, I responded “I won’t be standing in his shadow, I’ll be standing on his shoulders”.

We all stand on other people’s shoulders. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 said: “*By the grace God has given me I laid a foundation as a wise builder and someone else is building on it.*” This Thanksgiving think about that interconnectedness ... think about all those who have helped you out in the past and continue to do so today. Gratitude has us seeing that interconnectedness.

Gratitude is something we practice and I thought it might be a good idea to practice it now. This is something that I use on a regular basis when things stressful or difficult, to help change the negative channel. It is called a star exercise.



## **S.T.A.R. Connecting with the God of Peace**

### **S: Stop**

Don’t fix the problem, person or situation.

This is particularly true when you are in a conflict situation or find yourself annoyed or offended by something. But Stop also simply means take time to connect with Jesus.

**T: Take – a breath** – literally take several deep breaths in and out. Put your feet firmly on the ground. Roll your shoulders. Breathe in and out. Relaxing your body really does help to relax your mind.

Psalm 46:10 (ESV) *Be still, and know that I am God.*

### **A: Appreciate & Connect to Jesus**

Once we have stopped and calmed down, we are ready for the best way to enter God’s Presence – worship!

Psalm 100:4 (ESV) *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

Invite the Holy Spirit to remind you of a time recently or in the past when you were filled with gratitude. Sit in that memory. What did that gratitude feel like? Can you picture Jesus in that memory? Thank Jesus again for whatever it was

that filled you with gratitude. Ask Jesus if there is anything he wants to say to you. Write this down.

### **R: Respond**

Staying in that gratitude memory with Jesus present, now bring before Jesus something you are concerned about: a worry, a situation. Ask Jesus to tell you something about that situation. What does Jesus want to say to you? And now come out of the STAR exercise and respond to the situation.

**Philippians 4:6-9** *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the peace of God will be with you.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.