



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 19, SEPTEMBER 12, 2021  
PROVERBS 1:20-33; PSALM 19; JAMES 3:1-12; MARK 8:27-38

## “THANK YOU” IS A THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

**Mark 8:27-38** [*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."]*

“Thank you” is a theological statement.

That was the opening sentence of the Editors’ Introduction to the current issue of *Anglican Theological Review* which is devoted entirely to the subject of gratitude. Several notable authors offer their take on gratefulness as it

relates to the Christian journey, the current crisis brought on by pandemic, climate change, and the social and political upheavals that sweeping the world right now.<sup>1</sup> The journal was a timely read for me this week given the cumulative burden of news that too often angles toward the negative.

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<sup>1</sup> Anglican Theological Review. Vol. 103:3, August 2021, online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/atr>

Sensationalism sells, and neurobiologists have mapped the brain pathways that incline toward the negative preferentially. It is probably an evolutionary design to be hyper-aware of the threats—the negative news—which stick like Velcro on the neural pathways much more than positive news does.

So what can we do or say about it? Well, “thank you” as a theological statement is a good place to start, because those two words serve as public and personal acknowledgement of a gift that changes us and our world by an infusion of goodness that comes in the gift. And as people of faith, we know and trust that goodness is derived from a divine Giver in whose image we are made. All that we have and all that we are come from that Source of Goodness, that Ground of Being. Holding that point of reference is not a panacea, nor is it pollyannish; it is a way of being in this broken world.

But there is a nuance to be made here. A lot of popular psychology has jumped on the gratitude bandwagon in recent years, claiming that practicing gratitude can have positive psychological and even physical benefits. I believe that is true, but there is a

risk in this therapeutic angle if it becomes simply transactional—a form of self-medication for persistent negativity. Practice gratitude so I can keep on wallowing in psychological or spiritual negativity. There is no transformation if we do that, and gratitude will lose its effectiveness over time, like a pill taken to counter a toxin: over time it loses its potency due to tolerance.

Framing this as a theological enterprise is saying something different altogether. Gratitude is a virtue in the ethical sense. A virtue is a habit that, when practiced, inclines us toward good actions that have an intended purpose—which is ultimately to find fulfillment in God, and that is the key to human flourishing. It is what we were created for.<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus in today’s gospel says one must lose their life in order to save it, we often take him to mean literally, lose one’s life, follow him to the death, and for some, it means exactly that. But few of us will really ever run the risk of dying for our faith, and yet the words still come to prick our ears and to break open our hearts as we yearn to understand how to live—how to live well, and

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, read Nathaniel Warne’s article “Institutional justice and the virtue of gratitude.” ATR 103(3), pg. 286-297.

fully, and find fulfillment in God as the key to human flourishing.

So I will say again to you, “thank you” is a theological statement.

Our old friend Walter Brueggemann says that gratitude is the heart of Christianity precisely because in practicing gratitude we come to understand that everything is gift. Everything! Gratitude is the antidote to pride, which tempts us to believe that self-sufficiency and autonomy are our chief attributes when in fact pandemic (and really all of life) teaches us that we have precious little control, and we are nothing if not connected to the whole. Gratitude opens us to the truth that life is not achievement but gift. Lose one’s life in order to save it.<sup>3</sup>

Gratitude is also antidote to despair, which comes when we realize our pride has tricked us, that control is not the end game, and we come face to face with the painful truth that we cannot make our world completely safe, free of suffering, or altogether happy for ourselves. We cannot will it so for our children either.

Gratitude, as a way of life then, is an act of subversion, a part of justice—the cardinal virtue that thrives on an economy of

equanimity where gifts are given and received so that flourishing becomes the common human experience, not as *quid pro quo*, but as the source of delight for us all.

My friends, we call this Homecoming Sunday because on one level it is the occasion to return to church after summer breaks as we resume ministries and program offerings. But there is a deeper purpose in it being a homecoming. We come home and gather with a keen sense today that generations have gone before in this place, and we take our place now, trusting that generations to come will call this home as well.

A good deal has been written in recent years about the epigenetics of trauma, and how a person’s experience of pain causes definable changes to their DNA which then is passed down to future generations. The experience of trauma becomes imbedded in the genetic code of their progeny. I doubt this is news to you, but what may not be known is that there is a frontier of science that is looking at the epigenetics of gratitude as well, and there appears to be a pattern of methylation of the genetic code that is measurably changed in persons who practice gratitude as a way of life. It’s called blood memory in the Native

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<sup>3</sup> This line of thought is developed from Brueggemann’s article in ATR 103(3), pg. 268-270

American community—a way of life handed down.

Hilary Raining, a priest from Pennsylvania, who is a member of the Ojibwa tribe, says that the Ojibwan word for “thank you” (miigwech) involves more than simple gratitude—it intends utter wholeness, completeness, union. The word for thank you (miigwech) was not used regularly in Ojibwan discourse until the tribe interacted with European settlers because, prior to that, everything was understood to be gift from the Spirit so one simply lived fully by giving from what was already received. Nothing was owned. Gratitude was a way of being, a pervading sensibility as natural as breathing.<sup>4</sup>

We need rituals that help us rediscover this truth of abundant wholistic living. The Eucharist is one such ritual—central to our tradition—a way of gathering and sharing and receiving from the abundance of our lives, from one another, and from the abundant grace of God who calls us together. *Eucharist* literally means *thanksgiving*. It’s a way of laying down blood memory of gratitude so that our spiritual DNA is changed forever. Homecoming reminds us that doing this matters.

So welcome home. Look around you. Greet one another with grateful hearts. Share your “thank yous” today as theological work. Note who is not here—give that one a call or write a handwritten note to them. Share your thank yous with them, too. Practice gratitude. Lay down your blood memory, and trust that as you do, the DNA of this family, this community, will be changed for generations to come.

And remember, “thank you” is a theological statement that tethers you to God, the giver of life, now and always.

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<sup>4</sup> A very interesting article by Hilary Raining “Miigwech and blood memory: gratitude as a multi-lineage spiritual practice.” ATR 103(3), pg.