



September 19, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Psalm 1



“Acts 2: Praising God and Having the Goodwill of All People”

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)

Today is our homecoming service and many of you have not been in this sanctuary for almost two years, exiled because of COVID. In scripture, returning home is a cause, not only for thanksgiving, but for a grand celebration of praise to God. When Israel returned from exile after 40 years in Babylon, creation itself was filled with rejoicing, as Isaiah 35 declares:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. ...They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. (Isaiah 35:1-2)

We are filled with thanksgiving today, for our choir and our new Minister of Music, because they elevate our voices even higher, raising our souls along with creation in praise to God for this moment. But it is not, and should not, be simply a return to all of our old patterns.

One of the most poignant moments in all of scripture is the embrace of the prodigal son and the prodigal father

at his homecoming. The prodigal son was lavish in his wanton living, which left him not only penniless but empty inside. The father was lavish in his mercy and welcomed his son back with open arms. But the son is changed. In the far off country, he finally realized how much he needed the father’s love and how much he took it for granted. He returned determined to show his thanks through humble service.

As we return home, we too should return changed, with a deeper appreciation for the gift of our worship, our fellowship, and our service. God is calling Brick to grow our witness to Christ’s love:

...by sharing it with one another more boldly

...and pouring it into the world more joyfully.

...By growing our fellowship,

...our mission work,

...our stewardship,

...our children’s ministry,

...our worship.

This is not about shoring up weaknesses, but leaning into our greatest strengths.

The key to this growth is found in our Golden Verses from Acts 2. Last week we focused on the blessed gift of community in this passage and the call to share our expertise with the world. The internal drive to share grows from the goodwill for all people expressed in Acts 2. As we come to respect, treasure, appreciate, know, understand, and love others, we will naturally drive ourselves to serve them with all that we are.

As the drive to share grows from goodwill, goodwill in turn is born of praise to God.

Note the order in the verse, “Praising God and having the goodwill of all people...”

Amazingly, not only does this serve the purposes of God, but it is the secret to your well-being. As Jesus said, “...those who would save their life will lose it but those who lose their life for my sake will find it!” Your happiness and joy are tied to opening your heart for others.

Psalm 1 first describes the opposite of those who are happy, which is also the opposite of those with goodwill for others - those who sit in the seat of scoffers. Rather than goodwill, they are filled with poisonous invectives seeking to build themselves up through pulling others down. The scoffer cannot find happiness because they remove themselves from God’s realm, for God is love, and John’s

epistle tells us no one can hate a brother or sister and love God.

But in our praise to God, our hearts are expanded and changed. This praise happens on Sunday, especially on Homecoming days like this, yes, but that is not enough. Thus, Acts twice tells us “day by day”, discipleship is a daily task.

Here is the practical advice that I know so many of you love! Scripture gives us a very simple way to praise God daily – count your blessings. Psalm 103 says, “Bless the Lord o my soul, and forget not all God’s benefits.”

Counting your blessings is the opposite of scoffing. Scoffing is lifting up the failures and weakness of others. Counting your blessings recognizes the God within them.

As we thank God for so many things, we realize all the people whom you don’t even know, that have served you, saved you, helped you.

The one who keeps your heat on in the cold of winter in the dead of night.

The one who pulls your vegetables out of the ground in the blazing hot sun.

The one who keeps the internet humming so you can connect to the world.

This goodwill for all people propels us into action, like a parent leaping into the street to protect their child or a friend rushing over to fix your flooding basement. One African American pastor in Spartanburg told me, “We appreciate the

conversation and speaking up and speaking out and the table meals, but what my members truly need are good jobs.” We can help bless others through small acts of kindness and this is good, but our goodwill will shine forth with God-like love if we work to change others’ lives. And even so, the change within us, as we move to goodwill for all people, will be even greater.

The iconic country rebel, Willie Nelson said, “When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.” I think he is right. All the criticism you wanted to hurl at others, all the complaints that were on the tip of your tongue: suddenly you find you cannot say them anymore.

But counting your blessings not only opens your eyes to the role of strangers in your life, but your depth of appreciation of those you love multiplies.

And in the counting, you finally see how wonderfully they have built you up and carried you through, even when you didn’t appreciate it our name it.

The poignancy of Willie Nelson’s song *You Were Always on My Mind* cuts straight to the heart of it:

Maybe I didn't love you
Quite as often as I could have
And maybe I didn't treat you
Quite as good as I should have
Little things I should have said and
done
I just never took the time,

You were always on my mind
You were always on my mind
Tell me that your sweet love has not
died

Let’s create a social media storm to count our blessings! And I will begin.

The blessing I want to count with you today, the sweet love that I have seen, that will stay on my mind, the goodwill that has grown in these walls is the treasure of our Youth Elders and Deacon. I was in awe of them at officer training last week when Rev. Caroline Unzaga led us through a time of reflection on these Acts verses.

All three of these young ladies burst forth with wisdom (they all said music was the best part of worship!). They spoke joyously of service, in the Order of St. Paul and serving food. They spoke thankfully of the power of fellowship and friendship at Brick. And they showed forth the goodwill of all people, as they spoke about the mission trip they went on this summer in which they connected to people different from themselves but together expressed a unique praise to God that filled them with holy love for their new friends in the midst of their work together.

As we give praise to God for the gift of coming home, or return from exile, may we all be changed in the counting of our blessings, always keeping God on our mind as we grow our goodwill for all.