

A scenic landscape featuring a stone path that winds up a grassy hill. The path is composed of several large, flat, grey stones. The hill is covered in lush green grass and small shrubs. In the background, there are several tall, dark green evergreen trees. The sky is a vibrant blue, filled with soft, white, fluffy clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Walking the Gratitude Path

A Thankfulness & Bible Study Journal

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Introduction: All of us can fruitfully grow in faith as we give thanks to God with grateful hearts, every day, in every circumstance. As we live with a deeper sense of gratitude to God and with a stronger awareness of God’s Love for us, we can find more joy, more peace, and a real sense of abundance in our lives as we give our time, our talents and our treasure to God. In the words of 1 Timothy 6:19 we can, “take hold of the life that really is life.”

I have read, marked, learned and inwardly digested Kent Millard’s little book, *The Gratitude Path*. Kent is a fellow Hoosier (from Indiana) and a Methodist pastor who has served churches large and small. As a pastor, I would put him in the category of “Sage”; he is a wise man who has truly learned how to follow Jesus in a full and very productive way over the course of a long life of faith. In this journal, I will quote his book extensively with his words in italics, to point you in the direction of the abundant life that Jesus teaches.

For each “day” in the journal, I have provided a Bible passage for you to consider, along with a question for your reflection. In addition, I encourage you to write down three things you are thankful for every day. May the Lord of Hosts, the God of Angel Armies, bless you and protect you on this gratitude path to God.

The italicized portions on each page of this journal are quotations from *The Gratitude Path: Leading Your Church to Generosity*. By Kent Millard, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2015.

Day 1

Read John 6:1-24, John 11:41-44, Luke 22:17-19. *The gratitude path is the path that Jesus followed. When we think about the story of the Feeding of the 5000, our minds go to the food, but at the end of the story, John referred to the place where Jesus had fed the 5000 as: "... the place where they had eaten the bread over which the Lord had given thanks." (John 6:23) Before Jesus raised Lazarus from death to life he "looked up and said, 'Father thank you for hearing me.'" (John 11:41) On the last night of his life, Jesus took a cup and a loaf of bread and gave thanks to God before he distributed them to his disciples... When we follow Jesus along the gratitude path of life, we discover that we too live closer to God and experience God's abundance and blessings when we give thanks. (pp. 9-10)*

Q. Think of a time when you were able to give thanks for being **in the center of God's will** for your life. What was the long-term impact on your life?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 2

Read Luke 15:11-32. The "Parable of the Prodigal Son" could perhaps more accurately be called the "Parable of the Loving Father." The Father in the story represents God in our lives; he welcomes the son home as a beloved family member and not as a servant. *According to Jesus, our basic relationship to God is as beloved sons and daughters of God.* (p. 4)

Q. Imagine God throwing a party for you. Imagine God saying to you, "You are my beloved son or daughter, in whom I am well pleased." Describe the experience. How does it make you feel?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 3

Read Matthew 6:1-34. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount *Jesus refers to God twelve times as “your father” or “your heavenly Father.” Jesus wanted us to know God as he knew God, which is as a loving “Abba” – a caring Father, which makes us all children of a loving God... We are good stewards of all God has given us not out of fear of punishment but out of deep love and gratitude for all of the gifts of life our heavenly Abba has first given to us.* (p. 5)

Q. We all come from different family backgrounds, but most of us can remember someone who expressed unconditional love for us. Who has done that in your life? How have you come to a place in your faith that you can accept God as your loving parent who gives good gifts to you?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 4

Read Matthew 12:22-37. Jesus brought an incredible amount of healing to the world, but many religious leaders who saw him heal were jealous and afraid of losing their own influence and power, and so instead of being grateful for the healing of sick persons, they accused Jesus of doing evil. And that is the sin against the Holy Spirit, selfishly turning away from God to grasp for your own power rather than turning “into” the healing power of God with a grateful heart. It is only unforgivable if we refuse the healing God offers us.

In a similar way, we need to examine our hearts frequently to determine if we are living with a “grateful heart” for all that God has given us. However, sometimes we discover that we are not living with a “grateful heart” but with a “hard, judgmental, and condemning heart,” which makes us unhealthy in body, mind and soul. (p. 6)

Q. Examine your own heart. What do you find?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 5

Read Luke 17:11-19. Ten lepers were healed, but only one returned to Jesus to give thanks.

This man was a Samaritan, a member of a religious group that the Jewish people of Jesus' day looked down upon. But he was the only one of the ten healed lepers to return to Jesus, fall on his knees, praise God with a loud voice, and thank Jesus for making him whole and restoring his life. The healed Samaritan is the model for what Christ calls us to do. We are called to become aware of the ways God has blessed us and come to Christ, fall on our knees, and offer our heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving for all the blessings God has given us. (p. 9)

Q. When have you been like the nine lepers who accepted the healing but forgot to thank the Healer? When have you been like the one leper who returned to give thanks to Jesus? What difference did it make in your life?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 6

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. Pastor Millard writes powerfully about the loss of his wife of forty-eight years. *One day during my devotions [he writes], I read Paul's words to the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica: "Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." I recognized that Paul did not say give thanks for every situation but in the midst of every situation we may face. I was not thankful that I lost my wife, but I realized that there was so much to be thankful for in the midst of her loss... I thank God for her deep faith and total trust in the God who created, loved and sustained her all her life here on earth. Today whenever I am faced with a challenge, I remember her faith and say to myself, "Trust God no matter what."*

It is easy to give thanks to God when everything is going well... However, the real test of the depth of our faith is whether or not we can give thanks to God even in the midst of challenges, tragedies, suffering and death. In the midst of the most painful loss I have ever experienced, I can testify that there is always something for which we can give thanks to God. (pp. 14-15)

Q. How do you surrender all of your concerns into the hands of God and trust God no matter what?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 7

Read Acts 16:19-34. *When Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were arrested by the authorities and given a severe flogging with rods and thrown into jail with their feet fastened in the stocks. In spite of their suffering and pain, Paul and Silas sang songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. There was an earthquake that opened the doors of the prison. This led the jailer to free Paul and Silas and the jailer and his family became followers of Christ.*

When we offer prayers of thanksgiving to God and sing songs of praise to God in the midst of suffering, the very act of praising God lifts us up out of the pit of suffering and into the loving, healing presence of God. As long as we wallow in the pit of suffering and complain about our lot in life, we are stuck in despair. If we want to help people experience joy and hope in the midst of the challenges of life, we need to lead them in offering prayers of thanksgiving and singing songs of praise in every situation. (pp. 17-18)

Q. How do you give thanks to God in every situation?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 8

Read Romans 5:8, Romans 12:1-13. *Jesus showed the unconditional love of God for all humanity when he gave himself on the cross for the sins of all people. Paul expresses it with these words in his letter to the Romans: “God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). God’s love does not depend on our goodness or deserving it but on the nature of God’s unconditional love.*

*Our response to God’s unconditional love is our unconditional gratitude. This is also expressed in the book of Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God... We have gifts [to offer]... according to the gifts given to us (Rom. 12:1,6) Unconditional gratitude means giving thanks in every situation in life and developing compassion and generosity even in the most discouraging times. *In the face of disappointment in life a person can choose to become bitter or become better.* (pp. 18-19)*

Q. When you think of Christ dying for you on the cross, how does that help you live your own life with greater compassion and generosity?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 9

Read John 15:1-11. *In this passage Jesus compares himself to a grapevine, his Father to the vine grower, and his followers to the branches that are to produce the fruit. God removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit.*

Pruning always seems to be painful. Personal growth is often not easy at all. But this passage assures us that through the changes in life, if we abide in Christ, we are strengthened to grow not only in generosity and service but also in complete joy. *When we can surrender control of our lives and the lives of those we love into the loving hands of God, we can live each day simply counting our blessings and giving thanks in the midst of all the challenges of life... When we give thanks in all situations we rise up and become better people and more faithful servants of Christ.* (pp. 19-21)

📖 Think about something in your life that, upon retrospect, seems like a “pruning” experience. How did you respond?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 10

Read Malachi 3:10. The Biblical tithe is the understanding that *God has given us 100% of all we have and allows us to use up to 90% of our resources to provide for our basic human needs, meet the needs of others and bring glory to God. When we give 10% back to God, it is simply a practical way to say thank you for the 100% God has first given us... Some followers of Jesus feel that all of their giving to God's work in the world should be included in their tithe. Other followers of Jesus may begin by giving 2% or 3% of their income to God with the intention of increasing their percentage of giving each year until they are “giving the full tithe.” God is aware of our motives for giving and only desires that gratitude become our chief motive for giving our time, talent and treasure to God.* (pp. 25-26)

God's work includes the work of the church. The church is one of the few organizations left in American society that is not fee-based or subsidized by the government. At Holy Trinity, the generosity of her members supports the church in providing loving pastoral care to those who are poor or sick in body, mind and especially in spirit. It also makes it possible to teach the faith and facilitate worship. Of course, God's work extends beyond the programming of the church, but it is also true that many members, when you include the broader context of God's work, give far more than 10% back to God. The most important point is that you have a strong awareness of your participation in God's work and that you give with a grateful heart out of your substance and not out of what is “left-over.”

📖 What do you believe about tithing or giving a certain percentage of your income to God out of gratitude for all God has first given you? What is your motivation for giving?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 11

Read Luke 6:17-49. *“Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a large area of level ground. A great company of his disciples and a huge crowd of people... joined him there... Jesus raised his eyes to his disciples and said... “give, and it will be given to you. A good portion – packed down, firmly shaken, and overflowing – will fall in your lap. The portion you give will determine the portion you receive in return.” (vv. 17-20, 38 selected verses)*

Jesus used the image of a bag being filled with grain. When a person went to the market to buy grain to make bread, they would take a cloth bag to be filled. Grain would be poured into the bag until it seemed full, but the person buying the grain would shake it and press the grain down in order to get as much grain as possible in the bag. Jesus used the image [to mean] that when we open up our hearts and lives and give our time, talent and treasure to God, God responds by filling our lives full to overflowing with love, blessings, joy and peace.

The truth about life is that when we open our hands and give generously to God, then we are in the open-handed position to receive blessings from God. (pp. 27-28)

Q. Remember a time when you were generous in giving your time, talent or treasure and unexpectedly received more than you gave. What did you do next?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 12

Read Luke 12:13-21. *Two brothers came to Jesus because they were fighting over the division of the family inheritance. Jesus realized that the fundamental problem for both of them was their greed for more. Jesus said to them both, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy” (Luke 12:15).*

Jesus knows about our tendency to be greedy and want to hold on to our resources and possessions rather than sharing them with God and others. The antidote for the disease of greed is generosity... In this case we give not because God or someone else needs it but we give because we need to be healed from the life destroying illness of greed. One cannot be generous and greedy at the same time. (pp. 28-29)

Q. Have you ever gotten carried away in stockpiling things? How did it feel to give at least some of it away?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 13

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. *In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul encourages the Christians in Corinth to give generously to support people in need in Jerusalem during a time of famine and starvation. The need is real but Paul doesn't want people to give out of obligation or guilt. It is in this context Paul writes: "Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work" (vv. 7-8).*

Paul told the followers of Jesus in Corinth that God had already provided them with everything they needed to live a full life. I think Paul would say the same thing to most of us; God has already provided us with everything we need to live a full life. Paul doesn't say that God has provided us with everything we want but with everything we need. (p. 35)

Q. Make a mark on the line below to represent whether your giving is out of a sense of obligation or done with cheerfulness.

Obligation-----Cheerfulness

How can you move toward cheerful giving?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Day 14

Read Galatians 5:22-23. *Paul writes, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." One of the ways we can determine if the spirit of God is living in and through us is to ask ourselves:*

"Is love the motivating force in my life?"

"Am I kind?"

"Am I characterized as a joy-filled person?"

"Am I faithful to God?"

"Do I live in peace with God and others around me?"

"Am I gentle with others?"

"Am I patient with others?"

"Do I have self-control?"

"Am I generous with my time, talent and treasure?"

Paul lists love as the first sign of God's spirit in us. Jesus said the greatest commandment is "to love."... We love God first and allow God's love to flow in us and through us to those around us. Then we experience the presence of deep joy in our lives, peace in our souls, and our outward actions are characterized by patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control.

When we open up and receive God's abundant love into our lives, we are overfilled [with these Spirit gifts]. So we give to God joyfully and cheerfully out of the overflow of the blessings in our lives. We don't have less; we have more because we can't outgive God. God always gives far more to us than we can give back to God. This is the gratitude path. (pp. 36-37, 42)

Q. How do you yield the "fruits of the Spirit" in your life?

I am thankful for:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Preparation for Gratitude Sunday

My favorite image in Pastor Kent Millard's book has to do with understanding giving as a matter of the heart. He writes:

Life is a circle of receiving and giving. We receive gifts from God. We give them back to God and others. Then we receive gifts again and we give again. If we receive gifts from God and keep them only for ourselves, we die spiritually. It is only when we receive and give, receive and give, that the cycle of life brings meaning and joy to us.

An analogy of this process is the circulation of blood in our bodies. Our hearts receive blood from the other parts of the body and then it pumps the blood back to the other parts of the body. Our hearts are continually receiving and giving, receiving and giving. If our hearts received the blood from other parts of the body and said, "I will keep all the blood for myself" we would die. Our hearts are intended to receive blood and give blood to the body, and if our hearts stopped this flow of receiving and giving we would die... (p. 28)

Jesus teaches us that when we give generously we receive bountifully, so that we can give more and find more health and fulfillment and satisfaction in our lives.

My prayer is that as you prepare your pledge "gratitude card" for the financial support of the church in 2017, that you might increasingly be able to "give thanks with a grateful heart" that gives and receives, and gives and receives even more, so that your heart beats with the Love of Christ.

We encourage you to offer your pledge "gratitude card" when you come forward to receive Holy Communion at the altar of Holy Trinity on the weekend of October 29-30, 2016. May you know the Real Presence of Jesus as you walk the "Gratitude Path" to abundant and eternal life.

Faithfully,

Fr. Steve and Rev. Pam Easterday

October 2016

My Additional Thoughts



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