

September 20, 2020

A Walk With Gratitude
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Last year, in a moment of complete lack of judgment, we adopted a dog from the local Human Society. Or rather, he adopted us. If you follow me on Facebook or Instagram, you may have seen pictures of Dante, our 7-year black lab. He is a loveable goofball, and has quickly assimilated into our “pack.” When we first acquired Dante, I was disciplined with taking him for daily walks. Sometimes we would even head out twice a day. But the Kansas winter arrived. The walks slowly disappeared. Instead of a morning walk around the neighborhood, I would usher him out the back door, watching as he bounded through the snow and frost and then bolted back inside. We grew comfortable on the couch, and yes, as the saying goes, we let sleeping dogs lie.

This pattern continued. Until I realized that I missed our morning walks, and that what my soul needed was a small window of time where I could enjoy some sacred space (and let's be real—time alone) outside. So I set my alarm early. Got up. And went to get the dog off the couch. That first morning—he was less than enthusiastic. I had to pull him down the street. The next morning was a little better. The third morning—I thought I caught him yawning a few times, but he trotted beside me. After a week, I can now hear the jangling of his dog collar downstairs, as he not-so-patiently waits for me to tie my shoelaces and grab his leash. Now HE is the one walking me, and if I am not alert, I could easily find myself chasing a dog down the street in his relentless pursuit of a rabbit.

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This week is our first Sunday with our church-wide study, Rev. Adam Hamilton's book, *The Walk*. Rev. Hamilton will lead us on a walk of our own, exploring 5 principles for renewed and deepened faith. Jesus often used the metaphor of walking to describe what it means to follow him. The metaphor of the Walk is meant to convey that following Jesus is accessible to everybody. And while physically walking is not something everyone can do, you do not need special equipment or advanced degrees to be a disciple. All you need is a desire to love Jesus and serve your neighbor.

Like my journey with Dante, the dog, many of us start our in faith with energy and good intentions. This is often especially true of people who are new to being a Christian. There are periods in our faith life that we excitedly pursue Jesus. But life also happens. As a parent of two young children, I can attest that our life is constantly in motion. The quo is hardly status. Even for a "professional Christian" (as pastors sometimes are), it can be difficult to maintain spiritual health. Worship, giving, sharing faith, even serving others can easily fall away when other matters take precedent. This time together on our Walk will help us re-examine these essential practices.

The first steps on our Walk are Worship. It seems a little obvious to start with Worship—because, after all, if you are watching me right now, you are either here in the sanctuary or watching on our livestream. This is a sermon about worship, in a service of worship—the epitome of the phrase, "preaching to the choir." Also, it

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feels a little self-serving to preach/teach worship when worship is a big part of what I do as a Presbyterian minister.

But worship is also misunderstood, contorted, neglected, and often forgotten. Sometimes churchy people get so wrapped up in all the business of church that we forget that worship is our alpha and omega, the beginning and end of what we do. As our own Book of Order for the Presbyterian Church explains, “christian life springs from Christian worship, where we find our identity as believers and discover our calling as disciples.” So if you find yourself spiritually anemic, or lagging in zeal, the first question to ask is: *When was the last time you went to worship?*

Our church proclaims that “Christian worship gives all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving to the holy, triune God.” When we gather to worship, we glorify God who is present and active among us. Worship also sends us out in service so that we may continue to glorify that same God who is present and active in the world.” Worship is the heart Christian living. As Rev. Hamilton points out, “The modern English word “worship” comes from an Old English word, woerthship (or worth-ship). Worthship suggests something or someone is recognized as worthy of honor. Worship is how we respond to a Creator who is uniquely worthy of our admiration, our reverence, our awe, our thanksgiving and our praise.”¹

¹ Hamilton, Adam. The Walk (p. 21). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

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If worship is the heart of Christianity, then gratitude is the heart of worship. Every movement of worship, from the Call to Worship to the benediction is an expression of gratitude to God. That's because God is the ultimate giver of gifts. Everything comes from God, and everything belongs to God. God gives to us—not because God expects anything in return, but because giving is what God does. As a parent, giving gifts to my children is an endless joy. We often go to the dollar store to pick out inexpensive trinkets and when we leave, they clutch their treasures as if they cost a million dollars. The joy, of course, is priceless. God feels even more towards us, and in place of Dollar store coloring books, God has given us the earth and all its abundance.

So if God doesn't expect us to return the favor to God—then why worship? Rev. Hamilton explains, “Our lives are only properly oriented when we are seeking to give glory to God, honoring, revering, and recognizing God as the source of our lives. Our praise is not merely in words, but from the heart and with every part of our being. We are meant to be a living hallelujah. In seeking to give thanks, to praise God not only with our words but also with our lives, rendering our worship to God, we find communion with God and the grace, strength, and love to live as his people.” Worship is to God, but it is for us. Because we so easily turn to greed and selfishness in our daily living, the gratitude embodied in worship is counter cultural.

Society says, “be more.” Gratitude says, “you are enough.”

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The world cries, “you need to get what you deserve,” Gratitude says, “ you have more than enough.”

Our culture boasts, “you don’t need anybody.” Gratitude takes us by the hand and whispers, “we need each other.”

Gratitude is necessary for worship because gratitude requires an intentionality and, frankly, discipline. Gratitude does not happen passively. You have to be engaged in order to be thankful. Pastors often hear the lament, “I didn’t get anything out of worship.” And before we go down the trail of weighing the merits of this hymn or that hymn, one big question ought to be asked, “well–were you paying attention?” Because while not every sermon is a barnburner, or every hymn your favorite, there are movements to worship that call for your engagement. At the very least, there are opportunities to give thanks to God. Because, as Adamn Hamilton succinctly puts it, “We’re not called to give thanks because everything in our lives is going wonderfully. We’re called to give thanks because our life itself is a wonderful gift from God.”²

I have two challenges for you to consider:

The first is– attend worship faithfully for at least six months. In this age of COVID, you have more options than ever, so find a worshipping community and participate in their worship.

² Hamilton, Adam. The Walk (p. 32). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

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The second is to start keeping a gratitude journal, list, or some kind of record. Write down three things you are grateful for each day. You can do this before you go to sleep, or at dinner. You can find an accountability partner, if that helps. I'm not going to pretend that everything is hunky-dory right now in our nation. Yet God is still God. We are still God's people, and the world needs disciples of Jesus whose hearts have not calcified. The world needs us to preach abundance, not scarcity; hope, not fear.

Getting in the habit of gratitude is a little like those first few walks after a long time of inactivity. It is clumsy, impatient. But soon, your gratitude will run ahead, anticipating your presence, and you will jog alongside. Amen.