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Gratitude  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
Sept 11, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 and Luke 19:1-10

Today we begin a 5-week series on issues related to stewardship. I am not going to tell you what the themes for the five weeks are - because I'm sure you need a bit of suspense in your life. But this week, we are discussing "gratitude". Now, go ahead. Give a big sigh of disappointment. Because let's be honest, this topic perhaps does not have excitement written all over it. But I will at least open by saying that perhaps "gratitude" is not what you think it is. And I hope you will agree with me in a few moments. That gratitude is not what you think.

[image: called to be the church]

This series will be based on a package of materials from the United Church of Canada, which is called, "Called to be the Church". The package is over 100 pages long. It includes materials for 5 weeks including content for children, materials for home use, and even short sermons. I have found the material very helpful actually. Because most of the material reminds me of why we do not like talking about stewardship in church. The material gives me great examples of things that I am NOT willing to say myself from this pulpit. Most of the materials sound like thinly veiled (or completely unveiled) ways of just telling you that the church needs more money from you.

But I do not want to say that. And you do not want to hear it. Sure, that is part of the message, and yes we are facing a significant financial deficit this year. But stewardship is a much more life-giving idea than that. So we will not be using the UCC materials blindly as written. You're welcome!

[image: if Jesus saves why does the church always need money?]

Let me give you a short example from the UCC materials. The story of Zacchaeus that we just read from Luke. Zacchaeus has an encounter with Jesus, and immediately gives away half his money to the poor. In the United Church materials, I am directed to tell you that the encounter with Jesus made Zacchaeus a very generous person. And by

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extension that we should be more generous ourselves if we want to follow Jesus. The UCC materials tie that in with our reading from 2 Corinthians where we are told that “God loves a cheerful giver”. But the text is a rigged game. That epistle was written specifically because a preacher (not St. Paul) was collecting money to take to a church in Jerusalem. The UCC material is about as subtle as a pair of crutches. So I will not use it as written. I only shared it as an example of the materials from the UCC.

Or perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps some of you want to hear a message using that sledge-hammer approach. Perhaps some people like that. This week as I was reading Russia Today over breakfast, I found this story entitled,  
[image: russia today article]

“Orthodox Church threatens rich Russians with hell”<sup>1</sup> No subtlety there. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church flatly stated that “Rich Russians who refuse to share their wealth with people in need are on their way to hell”. And in case that message was too ambiguous the article later on states, “if a person with a lot of money is unable to help those who need it, then ‘this is the way to hell and there is nothing else to say here’.”

Personally, I prefer just a bit more nuance in my preaching - regardless of whether or not I’m on the receiving end of it.

So with that preamble out of the way, we are free to talk about gratitude. So - what is gratitude? What does gratitude look like? If you do a quick online search for images of gratitude, you can find tons of virtually identical images. They all show someone standing with their arms outstretched, usually with a sunset in the background. Often standing in a field of wheat. Images like these:

[image: gratitude according to the Internet - 6 images]

So according to the Internet, gratitude is basically just a light version of yoga. I think we can do better than that. So today I have invited a guest - an expert on gratitude - to join with me. At the outreach committee this week I asked people to give me the name of the person in this church they think of when they hear the word gratitude. And to be honest, it was a tie between me and Gail. So I guess we are the local experts on gratitude.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rt.com/russia/562155-patriarch-kirill-rich-hell/>

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Gail, come on down.

Gail: What is gratitude for you? Can you think of an example where you saw gratitude in action recently?

Paul: Story of 2 hospital patients.

Thank you Gail!

In our society - and even in our churches - our reality often looks more more like this:

[image: complaints vs gratitude]

Actually, I am a fairly grateful person in general, and I do naturally express my appreciation a fair bit. For example, my mother now has PSWs that come to her home and help here with daily tasks. And if Marjorie or I are with my mother when they visit, we speak with them and thank them for the great services that they provide. I remember on one occasion I thanked a PSW and she broke down and cried. It turns out that PSWs hear complaints all the time, and some of them never hear words of appreciation. This person was completely unprepared to have someone appreciate her! And yet, how many of us know someone who is only able to stay in their home because of the PSWs? I am extremely grateful to them.

None of us are independent. There is almost nothing you can buy in Canada that has not had to pass through many hands so that we can simple grab it off a shelf or have it delivered right to our door. Perhaps when we are shopping we should spend less time complaining. Instead, we could try to figure out how many different people have contributed to delivering the product directly into our hands.

I found some interesting information about cell phones recently. From the web site, "make tech [easier.com](http://easier.com)", "Your phone has probably been to more countries than you have. That's because it also contains more pieces of the periodic table than you do. A study found that the average smartphone contains about 62 distinct elements out of the 83 stable, non-radioactive elements in the periodic table as opposed to the paltry eleven non-trace elements identifiable in the human body. You don't get all 62 of those elements from the same place, and some of them are only available in a few places on Earth, meaning that without a global supply chain not even China could feasibly produce

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smartphones on their own.”<sup>2</sup> The list of countries we all need just so that we can check Instagram every 5 minutes includes China, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Russia, Canada, Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Mexico, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Argentina, and other.

None of us are independent. We rely on many other people to help us with goods and services we cannot live without. The only question is - are we grateful to them?

People will queue up to complain about things, but very few people take the time to actually tell other people what they appreciate. And we will fix that in just a moment. But I do wonder why that is the case. Is it simply part of the human condition? Are we ungrateful because of our upbringing, or our expectations? Are we ungrateful because we like to feel that we are independent? Why is gratitude in such short supply? I would love to know what you think about that.

One lens from which we might understand our reluctance to be grateful comes from the Gospel according to Douglas Adams. Better known as  
[image: hitchhikers guide book cover]

“The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy”. Reading from the preface: “Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly 92 million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea. This planet has - or rather had - a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it was not the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy. And so the problem remained; lots of the people were mean, and most of them were miserable, even the ones with digital watches.

And then, one Thursday, nearly 2,000 years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, a girl, sitting on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.maketecheasier.com/where-does-phone-come-from/>

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her own in a small cafe in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no-one would have to get nailed to anything.

Sadly, however, before she could get to a phone to tell anyone about it, the earth was destroyed to make a hyperspace bypass, and the idea was lost forever.”

[image: marvin with beach ball]

In Adam’s view of society, people are basically unhappy most of the time. And our suggested cures for this unhappiness involve moving money around. But more generally that we try to make ourselves happy by changing external things. Which is strange. Because happiness - as we all know - comes from within.

Sometimes in life, we already have what we need, but we choose to complain anyway.

[image: Wesley snipes tweet]

I cannot confirm that this tweet actually came from Wesley Snipes. But the tweet says, “People pray for cake ... but when the Almighty gives them eggs, oil, butter, batter, a pan and an oven they get frustrated and leave the kitchen.”

Willie Nelson famously said, “when I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.”

Gratitude is really not about what we have or do not have. Gratitude is about our own ability to appreciate what we have. Gratitude is a choice. Gratitude is a decision. Gratitude is an attitude. Well - almost. One more step.

I opened by saying that gratitude is not what you think. Here’s why. Because gratitude is also about what we do. Being grateful is one thing. But the action of expressing our gratitude takes gratitude to a whole new level.

[image: rumi]

As Rumi famously said, “Giving thanks for abundance is sweeter than the abundance itself ...”. The real power of gratitude comes when we tell another person what we are grateful for.

So now - at long last - I told you we would make this all happen today. Are you

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ready? There are 2 steps here.

Step 1: I invite everyone here to speak to someone sitting near you - not in your own family unless you are online - and tell them something about your summer that you are grateful for.

Step 2: We have a BBQ lunch after service. While you are milling around, select a person in this church that you are grateful for. Then walk over and tell them what you appreciate about them. I will even suggest you do that before you eat. Trust me, the food will taste sweeter after you have expressed gratitude to someone else.

Be grateful. It is literally in you to give.

*Amen.*