

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – Oct. 6 2019

Pentecost 17

Feast of Francis

Stewardship Kick-off

Mt 1:25-30

The Vestry and the Stewardship team have begun this new program year by declaring a Season of Gratitude. I really like that And it's been wonderful for our community. When we say out loud or on paper what it is that makes our lives rich, when we say out loud or on paper what we're thankful for, our hearts become more thankful. Our souls become more thankful. When you're feeling low, out of sorts, down in the dumps, maybe feeling a little unworthy or even worthless – and, hey, most of us know those feelings from time to time. One way out of that dark hole is to literally count your blessings. One. Two. Three.

Over these last weeks, we have circulated a parish-wide survey which so many of you took the time to respond to and we've circulated "I am Grateful For" cards with our worship sheets. The survey and the cards brought out such a positive, hopeful, yes grateful responses. Responses like this:

I am grateful for St. Thomas because...

- It's a great place of love and forgiveness
- It's my place to be closer to the Lord
- Encouraging me to get out of my own head and join a supportive community of love
- For making me feel welcome as a new member
- I am part of a peaceful, larger whole
- Beautiful music
- The Choir and Doug
- Supporting me in my faith journey
- Bible Study

- Great Staff
- My friends are wonderful and supportive in this crazy time
- The living example of God in all I meet
- Great Hospitality
- I can question
- It's beautiful
- This is one of the best church families out there
- Programs and ways to deepen my spiritual life.
- The community has welcomed me and my family with open arms
- Reflecting Christ's light

I could go on and on. There are so many more I could share but they all have a common thread running through them. St. Thomas is a place of warm and caring fellowship, a place of hospitality and welcome, a place where beauty in word, in music and human connection, in art and architecture is made known, a place of spiritual nourishment and growth, a place of stability in an unstable world.

Of course there's more. As one of my friends on the staff said "When you ask for feedback, well, you're going to get feedback". In addition to hearing what's wonderful, what's working, what's to celebrate, we also heard about places in our community where there's room for growth. Well, of course there is! This church – any church, after all, - is full of human beings. And this Church – as any church – is always going to be imperfect this side of the Kingdom.

So I'm certainly grateful for the feedback that has pointed out, as they say, "room for growth". Places where we, as a community can improve. Places where we can do better. And there are common threads that run through those observations as well. Better communication. More information. More outreach opportunities, particularly those opportunities which draw us to work together. More diverse worship experiences.

This is all really important feedback and, believe me, it's been heard and appreciated. I said this a few Sundays ago but I'll say it again. My door is always open. I am always eager to hear whatever you have on your mind. We'll hold it together and find the way forward. And I'll also say that when you've identified areas where there's "room for growth", areas where you believe improvement or change is in order, ask yourself how you can be part of the transformation you'd like to see. How can you do your part to make it happen? There's a wonderful line that's attributed to Gandhi that says, "Be the change you want to see." It's that kind of engagement that grows healthy Christian community.

The last thing the survey tells us is what a diverse community this is. We have lots of different outlooks and perspectives on how our community should engage in the world. We hear lots of different outlooks and perspectives on worship and music. We have lots of different outlooks and perspectives about how to deploy our resources of time and talent and money. In other words we live under a big tent. And I'm very grateful for that. It's a great strength to have a diverse community where we can learn from each other and grow together. It's also a challenge. It invites us to live humbly and openly to outlooks and perspectives that are different from our own. And of course that's really countercultural these days, but it's the Jesus way, that's for sure.

These responses are really telling us who we are at St. Thomas. And here's what underlies our identity at St. Thomas. We are **who** we are because of **Whose** we are. We are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to say that clearly, straight forwardly, unabashedly, and unapologetically. We are who we are at St. Thomas because we know **whose** we are. We belong to Jesus. And whether we would put it in exactly these terms or not, the truth of the matter is that we are all here, in different stages of the journey, every one of us, because we **want** to belong to Jesus. And we don't need to tiptoe around that. I'm

here because I want to belong to Jesus. And I'm going to be bold enough to say that's why you're here too.

Wrapping our minds and our hearts around what that really means – and just as important – what the implications for our lives are – is different for each one of us once again. None of us are in exactly the same place in our spiritual journeys. But we are all here today and Sunday by Sunday and often during the week, because we are looking for something larger than ourselves. We are looking for meaning and purpose and connection and grounding in something larger than ourselves. We are looking for Jesus.

And when we look for Jesus with open minds and open hearts, we will find him. Right here at St. Thomas. In your house. In wherever you work or go to school. Jesus is always there to be found as long as you're really looking.

Now, the gratitude for Jesus' presence in our lives, the gratitude for our lives here at St. Thomas, calls us to live openly and humbly and generously. That's right. Gratitude gives birth to generosity.

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Today marks the beginning of our Fall Stewardship campaign, which is a part of our year long celebration here at St. Thomas we're calling A Season of Gratitude. This community of blessing and forgiveness and love and service and fellowship and friendship exists because of your generosity. Our community is called into being by Jesus the Christ, and it's sustained by the power of Holy Spirit, which acts through your generous hearts.

In a few moments, you'll hear from Mike Allert, our Junior Warden and Chair of our Stewardship Team, tell you why he and Shirley give to the ministry done in Jesus name here at St. Thomas. Mike will tell you, and I know this because he's told me repeatedly over the years, that he gives because he has to. His heart, his soul, his being call him to give and give generously. Zonnie and I are with Mike and Shirley on that one. That's why we give. because we have to. Because giving to the ministry that Jesus calls us to makes us sure of who we are. That's what we began to wake up to 35 years ago when we began our stewardship journey, long before I was called to ordained ministry. We started giving because it made us more of who Jesus was calling us to be. Giving, and giving freely, began to liberate us from the trap of consumerism and scarcity, traps which bind so much of secular culture. One of the great paradoxes of the spiritual journey is that when you give and give freely in service to Jesus' ministry, we live more abundantly. More freedom. More grace. More love. Not less. More. That's why we will once again be increasing our pledge this year. We believe in this community and all ministries each one of us are called to here. We're giving out of gratitude for this place and we're giving to support the "room for growth" priorities that were identified and some of the priorities too.

For example, we want to bring on board half-time Associate for Communications to address those communications needs, more information needs that we all want to see improved. We're giving more to support a growing and diverse music program which will then allow us to diversify our worship. We're giving more to support increased outreach opportunities that will more deeply connect us to the needs outside our walls and connect us more deeply with each other.

We're giving more to support our hard-working and dedicated staff. Did you know our St. Thomas staff hasn't had a COLA in three years? That's not healthy. We're giving to support these very faithful

folks who are Serving Christ and our community for far less than any of them could be earning in the secular world. We're giving more because we are energized by the coming of the beautiful new worship space that we'll be returning to in December, God willing. Take a tour with Greg this morning and see what you think. Personally, I can't wait.

(explain pledge packet process)

As you consider your own pledge what will it reflect? Will it be a reflection of gratitude for all the blessings of your life, for your faith, for hope, for love? Will it be a reflection of your gratitude for your life here at St. Thomas? Will your pledge reflect your gratitude for God's mercy and grace, as undeserved as it is for all of us?

Your pledge reflects your investment in St. Thomas. Your pledge deepens your sense of participation and commitment and belonging. So make your pledge from a grateful heart. Make your pledge in the spirit of commitment to walk the Way of Love with Jesus right here at home. Make your pledge so that you might become more of who Jesus is calling you to be.

