

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Pushing Back the ‘Big Me’”**

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Thanksgiving, 2022

Luke 17:11-19

In 1950, a Gallup poll asked thousands of High School Seniors, “Are you a very important person?” Twelve percent said “yes”. In 2005, Gallop asked the very same question again of thousands of high school seniors. This time, 80 percent said “yes”. From 12% to 80% in a couple of generations.

I’m not sure how to think about that. I would hope every individual would know he or she is a very important person, if only in God’s eyes. But my guess is many are not thinking about God’s assessment; they’re thinking about their worth in their own eyes.

David Brooks is a columnist for *The New York Times*, and he critiques what he calls today’s “Big Me” culture, a culture that he sees as increasingly narcissistic, self-absorbed, and self-promoting. There are several causes. He points to social media which, of course, promotes narcissism as we try to build our profile and pile on the number of friends and followers and thumbs up.

In contrast to all that, the church has always stood for something other than the Big Me culture. Once Jesus was asked, “What’s the most important commandment?” Jesus answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Mt. 22:37-40). In other words, it’s not about me, or you . . . it’s about Him and it’s about our neighbors.

Those who study such things say narcissism is increasing rapidly. As poor, miserable sinners, we are probably all somewhere on the spectrum of narcissism. Moreover, I also submit it’s hard for a narcissist to express gratitude, (unless he’s trying to manipulate someone). Surely narcissism pollutes and distorts any sense of gratitude. Surely the narcissist prefers others to be thanking and praising him, rather than having to thank and praise God, and others.

The thing is, we don’t have to thank and praise God. He’s not holding a gun to our heads. If we want, we can con our way without ever thanking God. Many do, and God allows them that freedom. You recall, he did not track down the other nine lepers to ask them, “What the heck? Where’s the gratitude?” No, he left them alone. He let them go.

To the one who did come back, however, He said, “Your faith has made you well.” The only thing we know about His faith is that He knew He needed to say “thank you” to Jesus. We can be physically healthy, but we’re not well until we know how to thank God and others.

That’s ancient, biblical wisdom. There have been hundreds of recent studies touting the wellness benefits of gratitude. A quick check on WebMD lists a number of them. Grateful people experience increased happiness, reduced depression, reduced stress. Grateful people experience overall improved physical health. Grateful people have greater emotional strength when facing adversity. Grateful people sleep better and report fewer aches and pains. Gratitude seems to improve one’s immunity and even reduces inflammation. Gratitude helps you live longer.

So, WebMD suggests ways in which we foster feelings of gratitude. One of which is simply saying, “Thank you”, frequently, often. The act of saying thank you out loud, or writing thank you notes, even if you don’t really feel grateful, will help you grow your gratitude.

WebMD also suggests we practice gratitude journaling, nothing fancy or time intensive . . . just writing down a simple daily list of things we are grateful for. After two weeks of gratitude journaling, the average person will see a significant increase in happiness and life satisfaction.

WebMD even suggests we say grace before eating. Of course, it is immediately qualified by adding you don't need to be religious to say grace. "Just take a moment to express your thanks for your food." To me, that sounds so empty and hollow and without direction. More on that in a moment.

So, lots of health benefits for giving thanks, and lots of ways in which to foster gratitude. But here's the thing: if we're just giving thanks so that we feel more happy and less pain, then we're stepping right back into "The Big Me" culture. If we're just giving thanks to feel less stress and live longer, then we're trying to manipulate God, not thank Him, as a narcissist would. As children of God our gratitude needs to be different than the gratitude coming from the children of the world. We give thanks because our Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of our highest thanks and praise.

When we say grace, we are giving thanks specifically to *Him*, to Jesus, who is the wellspring of all grace. Our gratitude is not aimed at the vacuum of space. Our thanksgiving is aimed at the person, Jesus. You know His name and He knows yours. We're praying to the One who knows everything about us and loves us unconditionally. Whether rich or poor, healthy or sick, surrounded with family or lonely, He has compassion for us, like a father has compassion on his children. He hurts when we hurt. With the sacraments He has cleansed us of the leprosy of sin and gives us our lives back again. He has won for us the priceless gift of eternal life.

The Samaritan ran back to Jesus. Our gratitude runs back to Him too, to the Lord who saves us from our sin. That is, from Jesus comes the most important healing: the forgiveness of sins. The reconciliation and peace He made between God and man. Whoever you are, however you are feeling, your "cup runneth over" because God has already taken care of the big things in life, the most important things, the essential things, and He's done it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our gratitude is not blind as to its target. No, it is focused squarely on Him, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And our gratitude is not just so we feel more happy and less depressed. The Bible does not say, "Give thanks to the Lord, so that we feel good." It says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his mercy endures forever." That's the faith that makes us well. That's why we praise and thank Him not just this day, but every day, and forever, because He is worthy of our praise and thanks.

You know, we all have days that start just a little off, and then they get worse from there. Like a slinky tumbling down the stairwell into the basement, there are some days that cascade into the abyss. Thank God we're not living in a war zone as winter approaches. Instead, I find it's the little stressors that tend to snowball. After a night of intermittent sleep, I pour myself a bowl of cereal and there's no milk. Going without, I step on the scale and I'm up a couple. Can't find the keys, get to work too late for faculty devotions and learn the internet is down. Too much to do, not enough time, tired, grumpy, heavy, hungry. We all have days when the little stressors accumulate, days where we wish we had a reset button.

Stop, take a deep breath, and express your gratitude to God. That is your reset button. That is a way to stop and start over again. Gratitude is a chance to push back on the inner narcissist. Gratitude is an opportunity to step away from the "Big Me" culture. Expressing gratitude frequently and habitually is choosing to blow a little oxygen on the fire of our faith, and to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

If there are some healthy by-products to gratitude, well and good. We'll take them. Irrespective of those, however, we're going to thank and praise Him all our days, and forevermore, because He is worthy of our eternal thanks and praise. Amen.