

"THE GRACE OF GRATITUDE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago there lived in the land of Israel a very handsome and eloquent prince by the name of Absalom. The Old Testament tells us that,

"In all Israel there was none so much to be praised as Absalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him"

He used to get his hair cut once a year; he was a handsome prince, the idol of his daddy's Kingdom.

And he was also ambitious. He wanted to make sure that the crown of his father, David, would one day rest on his own head. Coldblooded and treacherous, he plotted insurrection against his father. He devised a clever scheme to undermine him and to win the people to his side. He would ride through the streets displaying his power. He would get up early and go and stand at the city gate watching there for the disgruntled and dissatisfied who came to the city to place their troubles before the King.

Whenever he met a man with a grievance, he fairly oozed charm and sympathy. "Where do you come from my friend?" "From such and such a town". "My name is Absalom. I have connections with the palace. Tell me your troubles". And so the unsuspecting citizen would pour out the grievances he might have against life and the present administration in particular. "Too bad" would be the reply of Absalom.

"Too bad there is nobody in this corrupt government to hear your case and help you. Ah, if only I were the King...if only I had the power, I would see that you got some justice"

And he would put his arm around the complainer. It was all very touching.

"And in this manner" the Bible tells us, "did Absalom to all Israel that came to the King for judgement; so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel."

It seemed good to them to have someone in a high place who would listen to their complaints. They were tiring of David who was growing old and inefficient, and they were ready to listen to this democratic charmer. And so the conspiracy grew. David was gradually undermined by this thoughtless, thankless, treacherous son, and by these thoughtless and thankless people who were charmed by Absalom.

But it's interesting to note that the record goes on to tell us how empty all of the promises of Absalom turned out to be, and how sadly the people were deceived. David had his faults, but poor David with all of his faults was an angel in contrast to this young master of a son. And the people came by painful experience to understand that Absalom had put his arm around them in order to betray them and that the cures he promised were far worse than the diseases. He had preyed on their discontent only to promote himself and to establish himself as the boss of the Kingdom.

DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

Now this ancient story has a message in it for us. It serves to remind us of how people can so easily and unconsciously undermine their own heritage by simply failing to appreciate the good things that are a part of their heritage and forever dwelling upon the imperfections. It's something that can happen in all areas of life. We fail to recognize the good in what we have. We become the victims of affable and ambitious Absaloms. It gives rise to what's called "subversion" - that undermining process that works like evil leaven in society...feeding on discontent, creating dissatisfaction, causing division among people.

This process gets its leverage from two painful facts. The first is the fact of an imperfect world. Nothing in life is perfect. There is no perfect system, no perfect government, no perfect Church, no perfect person. There is no perfect climate, no perfect city. There are some weeds, as they say, in every garden and some faults in every friend. We can always find something to complain about, because imperfection is stamped on everything we touch. What was it that Churchill once said about democracy..."the worst form of government ever devised by man, except for any other".

And the second fact is that God has provided us with certain moral equipment to deal with life's imperfections. Yes, He has given us the critical faculty, the moral capacity to discriminate, to find fault, to criticize. It is, to be sure, a necessary function, and woe to any people when they lose it or have the right taken away from them. The function of this critical spirit is to correct - to see the wrongs and to right them - to see the weeds in the garden and pluck them out. Certainly without criticism, there would be no progress.

HOWEVER

But this critical spirit - like every other human faculty - contains certain very definite dangers. Meant to be corrective, it may easily become a destructive, subversive and disintegrating force. It was such misuse of criticism that Jesus was referring to when He talked about people who strain at gnats and swallow camels, and about the man who saw the mote in his brother's eye and missed the log in his own eye. Fault finding can go too far, becoming lop-sided and unbalanced.

I heard a story recently about two women who were on their way home from a concert in which a violinist had given an almost perfect performance. "Wasn't that wonderful...beautiful and breath-taking" exclaimed one woman. "I didn't like it all all" said the other. "Why the way he blew his nose after that first number ruined the entire evening for me". We all know people like that...who go through all habitually missing all of the glorious music, and who hear only the blowing of the nose. They're the ones who concentrate on the 95% that is bad in a situation and overlook the 95% that is good.

This was the sin of David's people. Certainly there were faults in him and things wrong with his administration, but unable to see the garden for the weeds, discontent with the smaller things and blind to the larger things that were good, they thus opened the door for Absalom the saboteur, the agitator. It's a good way to lose one's heritage.

APPRECIATING OUR HERITAGE

You might go on and say that this is a good way to lose the heritage of life itself...with all of its common mercies and blessings that enrich it and make it beautiful. I wonder at

times just how much value we really put on the grace of gratitude and on this spirit of thanks-giving. The longer I live the more convinced I am that it is virtually impossible to live happily anywhere without the grace to recognize and appreciate the good in what we have.

There was a farmer once who, having lived on the same farm all his life, grew tired of it and desperately craved a change. He subjected everything on the farm to his own blind and critical eye, and at last decided that he would sell the old place and buy another farm more to his liking. And so he listed the farm with a real estate agent who prepared a sales ad for the papers. However, before placing the ad in the paper, the agent read the flattering description of the property which he had put together. He talked of the farm's advantages, its ideal location, its fine equipment, its fertile acres, its well-bred stock. "Now, wait a minute" said the farmer, "Read that again, and this time go a bit slower" And so he repeated what he had just read. "Changed my mind" said the farmer. "I'm not selling...I've been looking for a place like that all my life".

Dr. Russell Conwell's great lecture "Acres of Diamonds" was built around the idea that the riches of life are all around us, wherever we are. But our eyes sometimes fail to see them for the simple reason that we magnify the difficulties and overlook the advantages and fail to recognize the good that is ours.

This, of course, was the story of the Prodigal Son as he set off for the far country. Something had broken down inside him before he packed his suitcase. He had lost the grace of gratitude. He failed to appreciate all the good things in his inheritance. To be sure, there was probably a thing or two to complain about - a father too busy to be bothered, an elder brother with a sour disposition. But I wonder...did the prodigal allow the 5% that was wrong to obscure the 95% that was good and right...and thus he was easy prey for the voices that spoke from the cellar of his being, promising a new freedom in a far away land.

HOME / CHURCH / FRIENDS

From home where the grace of appreciation has broken down come young people and others not-so-young, who have fallen into the habit of magnifying each other's faults and minimizing each other's virtues so long and so habitually that love has been undermined and a home broken.

And so, too, we often lose our finest friendships, flare up at some small irritation or magnify some minor fault, until all the years of a rich relationship are one day severed.

And the same sort of thing can happen within a church, too. We sometimes fail to realize or appreciate our spiritual inheritance. True, the church is an institution of many faults, stamped with all of the imperfections we have in ourselves, and its critics have plenty of ammunition. But the time has come to deepen appreciation of the Church, to balance our criticism of its faults and failures with a recognition of its worth and witness in society, lest, as in other lands, little by little, we let this precious heritage of the church slip by. And whether we think of the church at large, or the little church at the cross roads where we hold membership, the message is the same. We ought not to allow its faults to blind us to its larger worth.

THANKFUL HEART

In one of his books, Fulton Oursler, introduces us to his old black nurse whose name was Anna Maria Cecilia Sophia Virginia Avalon Thessalonians. She was born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland and attended not only his birth, but the birth of his mother as well. Fulton Oursler pays this black woman a wonderful tribute for he tells us that it was this person who first taught him the great lesson of the thankful heart.

"I remember her" he said, "As she sat at the kitchen table in our house with her hard, old brown hands folded, with her black eyes lifted to the ceiling, and the husky old voice saying, 'Much obliged, Lord...much obliged for my vittles'". "Anna" I said, "What's a vittle?" And she replied, "It's what I got to eat and drink...that's vittles". "But Anna"... "wouldn't you get your vittles whether you thanked the Lord or not" "Sure" she said, "BUT it makes everything taste so much better to be thankful".

Fulton Oursler goes on to tell us that there came a time when he passed through a very bitter and trying experience. He points out to us that it was the memory of Anna's thankful spirit that kept him going. It served as a source of inspiration. It gave him a handle with which to work. Finally word came to him one day that Anna was dying. He hurried to her bedside and found her with her hands folded in prayer and pain, and wondered what she would find to be thankful for in such a time.

"She opened her eyes...smiled...and the last words she spoke were, 'Much obliged, Lord...much obliged for so many fine friends'".

I think it is well for us to stop what we are doing and occasionally say with Anna, "Much obliged, Lord, for my vittles". "Much obliged, Lord, for my fine friends...much obliged, Lord, for my family...for my church, for my work, for my country."

Things do take so much better when we practice this grace of gratitude, to appreciate all that is ours and the blessings of our inheritance.

PRAYER

Grant, we beseech Thee, O God, that the words which we have heard this hour with our outward ears may - through Thy grace - now be so grafted inwardly in our hearts that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honor and praise of Thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

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|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <u>Boga Kouadio</u> | 2. <u>Rusty Carpenter</u> | 3. <u>Valerie Jones</u> |
| 4. <u>Ada Kinney</u> | 5. <u>Helen Breit</u> | 6. _____ |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray..

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

We pray too for loved ones and dear friends whom we mention in these moments in the privacy of our thoughts...separated from us by distance, but not by thought and love and concern.

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 22, 1987

FATHER GOD, YOUR HAND has touched our dust and given us the gift of life.

You have given us the sense of sight to see flowers
and friends.

You have given us the sense of sound to hear words
and wind.

You have given us the sense of touch to feel and to
explore the world in which we live.

AWAKEN US, O LORD.

To the wonders of the world around us.
To the sights and the sounds of nature.
To the presence of those who surround us.
To the mysteries of life that we cannot comprehend.
To the simple joys that we can experience.

THEN WE CAN BECOME THANKFUL -

That we are alive,
That we can see, hear and experience,
That we can think and remember,
That we can love and be loved,
That we can wonder and explore,
That we can pray and can praise You.

LORD, WE THANK YOU -

For being patient with us,
For not forgetting us when we forget You.
For loving and forgiving us,
For being here with us now - in our worship and fellowship.

For music and singing.
For rest and leisure.
For laughter and joy.
For those who understand.

MOST OF ALL, WE THANK YOU for not withholding the blessings of life from
us even though we take them for granted.

NOW TAKE US FROM OUR WORSHIP into the world where we turn words of
thanksgiving into deeds of loving service.

KEEP US close to the side of Christ...mindful of His values and always de-
pendent on His Spirit...

For we would live, even as we pray, through Jesus Christ,
our Lord.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 22, 1987

I. ROSE ON THE ALTAR

- A. In honor of Megan Alyssa Westermann Clark, infant daughter of Cynthia and Gerald Westermann Clark, born November 13th, Gainesville, Florida. Granddaughter of Phyllis Westermann.

II. GREETING TO THE VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted...and hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more...
- B. Take a moment to fill out a visitor card..sign...join us in worship...work with us in the programs of service.
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil... celebrating our 150th year...fourth building...neighborhood church...we minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit.....

III. PARISH CONCERNS / IN THE BULLETIN

- A. Review them on your own before you depart. Let me highlight one or two of those announcements...
- B. A word regarding the canvass. To date, we are grateful for the 143 pledges received. Number: 143 Amount: \$ 83,844
If you have not yet sent in a pledge, may we encourage you to do so today....
- C. New members to be received two weeks from today. December 6th. Persons interested in strengthening a tie with us this Fall are invited to share this word with us...and to come to the "Conversations in Membership"...Monday evening, November 30th.

To new friends we like to share those words of Wesley, "If your heart is as my heart is...then come, give me your hand". Hearts and hands are needed to help keep this church strong in ministry at this busy corner of God's Kingdom.

IV. CHURCH FAIR / A WORD OF THANKS

- A. To all who worked on the Church Fair and helped to make it... "Thank you". To Anne Davenport, a special word of thanks. Some special bargains...pecans and cards still on sale.

V. OFFERING: "More blessed to give..."