

In Gratitude
Colossians 3:12-17
December 29, 2024
Rev. Scott Anderson

A few years ago, our Thursday Book Group read a wonderful book by Anne Lamont called *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. In the book Lamont talks about the fact that, though it was not a custom for her family as she grew up to say grace before meals, now when she and her two adult siblings, all of whom became believers in middle-age, gather for their Thanksgiving meal, someone always ends up saying grace. She wrote, “I think we’re in it for the pause, the quiet thanks for love and for our blessings, before the shoveling begins.”

I was really struck by her phrase “I think we’re in it for the pause”—the pause being when we stop for a moment to acknowledge God’s abiding presence in our lives. We step out of time for a moment to recognize that all of life is a gift, a gift we have freely received and not earned. We pause to thank God as the Source of our many blessings, especially in this season of Christmas.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to churches he was in a relationship with was his sense of gratitude. Many of his letters in the New Testament were written to address problems and conflicts in these churches, yet despite these heated debates, Paul always takes pause in his correspondence to admonish the congregation to be grateful. His letter to the Colossians is a great example: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”

And so, in this my last sermon, I want to follow Paul’s advice. Fortunately, we have not had to deal with any heated conflicts at Westminster during my tenure as your pastor. Nevertheless, I am grateful to God for this opportunity—this privilege—of serving as a Minister of Word and Sacrament with this congregation over the past eight years, a calling I did not think would be a possibility when I left the ministry 34 years ago.

I am grateful for your resilience. My ministry at Westminster will no doubt be remembered as the time we survived a global pandemic. Life threw us a curve ball no one expected, and that none of us was prepared for. When the country went into lockdown in March of 2020, we had to regroup and figure out how to stay connected to one another while restricted in our daily movements.

In person Sunday worship was cancelled for more than a year, and I am grateful for John Tarr’s commitment and technical ability to move us to weekly worship online. At first, we had to record each service in advance of Sunday morning and then upload it to You Tube. I will never forget the Christmas Eve service of 2020, when we recorded the service days before December 24, preaching and singing Christmas carols in an empty sanctuary. It all felt surreal.

But there was a silver lining to all of the challenges of isolation presented by the pandemic. Westminster purchased and installed equipment to live stream weekly worship, a move we probably would not have made so quickly without the pandemic. Today, in the course of any given week, about half of our attendance in worship is online, and our total worship attendance, both in person and online, typically exceeds our pre-pandemic average. We have-- and you will continue-- to experiment with ways to better connect our virtual worshippers with our in-person attendees. Virtual worship has become an important part of our new post-pandemic normal.

There were other silver linings to other challenges during my ministry here. A small group of our leaders participated in an online seminar several years ago about repurposing church property, led by a Presbyterian pastor in Virginia whose congregation had made creative use of its empty space to serve the missional purposes of the church while providing the congregation a sustainable income.

His experience enlarged our own imagination, and we retained a commercial real estate agent to help us think through the best use of all of our empty classrooms. It was clear a school would be the best use of our facility and so we went about refurbishing the lower level, bringing it up to code and securing the necessary zoning variance from the city to allow us to lease our space to the Acton Academy, a new private school.

Today, almost a third of our church budget is derived from non-pledged sources, including the school, a demonstration of your resilience to changing circumstances, and your deep commitment to further the ministry of this congregation.

I am grateful for your hospitality. What caught my eye about Westminster when I was director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches was your decision to invite a Muslim school, which had lost its building in a fire, to use this church facility until it found a new home. That decision spoke volumes about your Christian hospitality to our neighbors from other religious traditions. Of course, that temporary arrangement lasted almost 10 years, with both the Westminster congregation and the Muslim school benefiting greatly from this new relationship. Not only was this a unique opportunity to develop relationships with people from a religious tradition that is not viewed favorably by the wider culture, but it also gave the Muslim teachers, students, and parents the opportunity to see first-hand how this congregation's Christian love of neighbor was put into action.

I am grateful for your generosity. I have never been part of a congregation that is so generous in serving this community and supporting this church not only with financial resources but with your volunteer time and talents as well. Every request for help, whether it be from the Madison area Jail Ministry or the Thoreau School, is met with an outpouring of generosity.

Soon after I arrived in 2017, we learned about food insecurity at Thoreau. Many students came to school on Monday mornings unable to learn because they did not have enough to eat on the weekends. And so we launched the Thoreau Weekend Food Bag Program, a unique interfaith collaboration which provided over 30 students with a bag of groceries to take home on Fridays for the weekend. Over time that ministry morphed into new efforts to meet the growing need. During the pandemic, our fellowship hall became a giant food pantry to serve students from nine schools, with over 60 volunteers delivering groceries to homes each week. And this school year, the program is now run by the school district, with local congregations and the Thoreau PTO providing volunteers to deliver fresh food to families in need each week.

There have been other ways you have expressed your generosity. Since I have been here, when the annual stewardship campaign twice had fallen short of its goal, the Session went back to the congregation to request second mile giving, in spite of my skepticism, in asking for more congregational support. Both times, this church not only met the second mile giving goal but exceeded it.

I am also grateful for the terrific staff team here at Westminster. I have told colleagues that collaborating with Joe Chrisman is like being on the staff of a tall steeple church. His outstanding musicianship, his understanding of Presbyterian worship, and his deep faith are inspiring. Dorothy Blotz has for many years enriched our worship experiences as our accompanist. Every good church secretary or church administrator I have worked with has had

both good administrative gifts and good pastoral gifts in caring for the people they serve. Katie Bencze has both. And by keeping the trains running on time around here, she has made my work much easier. Amy Poland as our Children's Ministry Coordinator continues to bring creativity to the work of Christian Education and hospitality to our younger families. Your next pastor is fortunate to inherit such an outstanding staff team.

Finally, I am grateful for your courage. I had an incredibly challenging time in looking for a call to parish ministry once I was re-ordained in 2011. I interviewed with almost a dozen pastor nominating committees. Typically, there would be one or two on the PNC who were excited about the prospect of having me as their pastor, but the rest of the committee would look at me grim-faced: "How many members will we lose if we call pastor who is openly gay?" was the usual response. It happened so frequently it got to be almost humorous.

After four years of searching, I was ready to give up, and then the PNC here at Westminster reached out to me in the late summer of 2016. Even though the committee knew that a couple of families would likely leave if they called me to this church, the committee was not intimidated by that threat. The truth is, for someone who had been out of parish ministry for 26 years, and for someone who were openly gay, it was a courageous act for the PNC to nominate me to be your pastor, and it was a courageous act for you to affirm my call to this congregation. I will be forever grateful for your courage.

I have always believed that central to our faith is not right belief, nor duty and obligation, nor guilt and fear. Central to our faith is gratitude to God. Giving thanks honors God and nurtures life.

We all know how much our attitude towards life makes a big difference in how we live. We can go around moping and whining, focusing on the negative, complaining about our disappointments, our hurts, our hardships. Or we can approach each day thankful for what a miracle it is to be alive with God by our side and amazed over both small and large blessings.

This day, at the close of my ministry with you, I say, thanks be to God for Westminster Presbyterian Church, and for our ministry together. You have been a very large blessing to me. Amen.