

“Knowing How to Say ‘Thanks-a-Lot’ and Mean It.”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, April 10, 2016 – Easter 3
Scripture Readings: Psalm 30; John 21:1-19
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The Psalmist knows how good life is. Oh, he does say he has faced some trials and disappointments, but God has been there to help him get through whatever he faced. He will surely give thanks to God always. Having known what it is like to struggle and suffer, he is more than happy to say “thanks” when life is going well and he can attribute his good fortune to the support of God.

If I asked you if you can remember a time when you were very thankful to God, can you give an answer? I am not asking for any public confession or affirmation, but think about it – has there been a time when you felt God was guiding, directing, or guarding you to safety?

And whether or not you can answer that question, has there been a time when you were very thankful to someone else for something they did? A friend, family member, colleague or co-worker, neighbour or even a stranger on the street? Surely we all have a time we can identify when we were thankful for what another had done for us.

Now I tried to come up with some significant moments in my life where I wanted to or did express great thanks to someone. Just a way to feed your thoughts and initiate the discussion. A few moments came to mind immediately, but one arose as I was at a Celtic music event I attended this weekend.

The group Failte, a Celtic music group with three violins, a flute and guitar, entertained with popular foot-stomping, hand-clapping music, including traditional folk songs primarily from Ireland, Scotland and Newfoundland.

Clearly talented musicians, they had the intimate audience of 45 people in the mood for a traditional kitchen party. Among the songs sung was an Irish folk song that begins:

*In Dublin's fair city,
Where the girls are so pretty,
I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone.
As she wheeled her wheel-barrow
Through streets broad and narrow
Crying "Cockles, and Mussels, alive, alive oh."*

Then comes the chorus:

*Alive, alive oh, alive, alive oh,
Crying "Cockles and Mussels, alive, alive oh."*

Now at the concert was Fred Moss, who taught music and history, among other subjects, at High Park Elementary School in the early 1960s.

So I asked him at intermission if he had taught the Molly Malone song in grade seven music. He assured me he had. As a result, I thanked him for doing that so I could pass the Molly Malone sing-a-long test in the first half of this performance; otherwise I would have had to fake lip-syncing it.

So now I have two things to be thankful for from my elementary school days – music so I can avoid embarrassment at a Celtic Music

concert, and oral arithmetic class, also taught by that same teacher, Mr. Moss, so I can add up dart scores and subtract from 501 with sufficient skill to be coordinator of the Club 111 Dart Club.

So I ask again, having offered those stories, are there times or people or situations or experiences for which you are immensely thankful?

A study done a few years ago showed that when people are thanked, they are more likely to do something again to help that same person or group.

A group of people were asked to help an individual write a cover letter for a job application. Half of the group received a perfunctory “thank you” note after offering their insights; the other half received a detailed and effusive letter of thanks as a result of their offering.

Not surprisingly, the group that received the curt “thanks,” when asked if they would help with a further draft of the letter, only 1/3 agreed to the task, whereas over 2/3 of those who received the warm and detailed thanks agreed to offer further help.

Psychologists have determined that being thankful can improve our overall well-being, can enhance our physical health, can strengthen social relationships, help produce positive emotional states, and help us cope with stressful times in our lives.

Sharing thanks shows that we value what others do, and maybe encourage them to do it again.

So the Psalmist is full of thanks, but the disciples fail to thank Jesus for the fishing help or for the shore lunch. I know people from southern Ontario who willingly, and gladly, spend hundreds and hundreds of dollars to fish in the north and have a shore lunch.

It's a big deal, and surely was an act of immense kindness even in Jesus' day on the Sea of Galilee. It bothered me that the disciples did not say "thanks you."

Then it hit me -- something interesting about the story I have heard no one comment on, though no doubt it might be out there. It is hard to give thanks, and appreciate what someone else has done, when we are stressed by our own worries and uncertainties. Being thankful implies by the very nature of the act that we are not stressed within ourselves, and so we can see the world from the focus and perspective of another.

The disciples were stressed beyond imagination. They saw Jesus killed on the cross, and their leader gone. They were uncertain about their own future, and the future of the movement Jesus started. They were so confused they returned to what they knew – fishing – and were all of a sudden failures at that. Where was the future for them? In such personal worry and uncertainty, they could not see beyond themselves to say "thanks" for the kindness of someone else.

We can say thanks when we no longer take ourselves too seriously, and are too obsessed with our own issues. There can be a freeing and release that happens when we say "Thanks" and mean it.

The Psalmist learned it, and I am sure eventually the disciples learned it if they were to become leaders and encouragers of others.

It is something we all would do well considering and adopting: showing our thanks for the kindness and goodness of others.

I say, "Thanks to all of you for considering doing just that."