

Preparation for Gratitude

This covenant group session is based on the themed ministry topic for November, Gratitude.

Have you ever felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude? Pause for a moment and remember how it felt. What about brief little moments of thankfulness? Do they come to you unbidden, or do you consciously look for things to be grateful for?

Gratitude adds richness to our lives. It helps us live in the present. When we focus on what we are grateful for, we focus on the positive instead of on the negative aspects of our lives. It makes us aware of the interdependence of life and of how our lives are enriched by others. All these things can reduce stress and increase happiness.

Gratitude is a wonderful, positive feeling – a joyous moment that can contribute to happiness and a richer life. But gratitude can also offer a window to our wider connections. Perhaps you bit into an apple, enjoyed the sweet, crisp taste of fall, and felt a sense of gratitude. But how did that experience happen? Part of the apple experience was your own doing – you took the time to go to the farmer’s market and you chose the fruit carefully. But the apple also came via the orchard, the trucker, the farm worker, the cycle of the seasons, the origin of apples in central Asia, and the colonists who brought apples to America. That moment of joyous apple gratitude can give rise to a sense of connection to nature and to others in our world, a sense of the interdependent web of existence.

There are barriers to experiencing gratitude. Suffering is one. It is hard to feel grateful when our lives are full of pain. Yet life is a mixture of both joy and sorrow. Sometimes, but not always, in looking back at the dark episodes of our lives, we find they were a time of growth for which we are now grateful. Another barrier is that we live in a consumerist society that emphasizes the need for more and more and more. If we buy into this way of thinking, we never feel that we have enough.

One way to increase awareness of the good things in our lives is to engage in a gratitude practice. A common approach is to keep a gratitude journal, as described the *3 Good Things* exercise developed by psychologist Martin Seligman. Every day for a week, write down three specific things that went well. For each, describe the experience in detail. Then think about how it happened – what you did, what other people did, and what was natural, like a sunset, or random. Meditating on the happenings of the day is another gratitude practice. In the Japanese Naikan meditation, people ask themselves about what they have received, what they have given to others, and what troubles they have caused. There are many meaningful gratitude practices that can help people change the focus of their lives.

This essay was partially based on material in the *Touchstones* November issue, “Gratitude,” especially these essays: *Why Gratitude is Good* by Robert Emmons, *The Anatomy of Gratitude* by David Steindl-Rast, *Gratitude and Mindfulness* by Jack Kornfield, *Gratitude: The Heart of Faith* by Rev. Galen Guengerich, and Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland’s *Introduction*. Many of the quotations were taken from *The Common Bowl*. You may want to explore this issue further.

Here are some quotations you may wish to consider as you think about the topic of gratitude.

Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation. *John Ortberg*

We’re a nation hungry for more joy: because we’re starving from a lack of gratitude. *Brené Brown*

Darkness deserves gratitude. It is the alleluia point at which we learn to understand that all growth does not take place in the sunlight. *Joan Chittister*

[Gratitude is] an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify some amount of goodness in our life. *Robert Emmons*

Feeling entitled is the opposite of feeling grateful. Gratitude opens the heart, entitlement closes it. *Paul Gibbons*

The Extraordinary is easy. And the more extraordinary the Extraordinary is, the easier it is: "easy" in the sense that we can almost always recognize it. . . . But the Ordinary is a much harder case. . . . we hardly ever notice it. The Ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude. *Cynthia Ozick*

As a child, I didn't know what I didn't have. I'm thankful for the challenges early on in my life because now I have a perspective on the world and kind of know what's important. *America Ferrera*

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground. *Rumi*

Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever had an experience where you felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude? Re-live that experience and that feeling.
2. When you feel gratitude, what do you do? Do you usually express it in some way, like a prayer or thanks to someone, or do you just treasure the feeling?
3. Try out a gratitude practice and reflect on the experience. How did it work for you?
4. Think back to a difficult time in your life. Was gratitude possible for you? Is gratitude possible as you reflect back on the experience?
5. In a society that emphasizes "more, more, more," how do you get a sense of having enough?
6. Imagine a Thanksgiving get-together with people you have known. Reflect on the different kinds of connectedness that the dinner represents – family and friend connections, all the ways that the food came to the table, historical and cultural connections.

Words of the Day

This month, in keeping with our theme, we will use an abundance of phrases. Use phrases that refer to specific experiences in your recent past. For example, instead of listing food, mention the delicious apple you had at lunch. Or instead of listing friends, list a specific great experience you had with a friend. You may put several ideas on one slip of paper, or you may use more than one. The Words of the Day sentence is "I am grateful for"