

*The Church: United in  
Thanksgiving*  
*The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 10*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

November 18, 2018

Psalm 100

<sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. <sup>2</sup>Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. <sup>3</sup>Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. <sup>4</sup>Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. <sup>5</sup>For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

## Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,<sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,<sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism,<sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

<sup>7</sup>But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.<sup>8</sup>Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."<sup>9</sup>(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?<sup>10</sup>He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

<sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,<sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

<sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.<sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,<sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

With a doctorate in Religious studies, Diana Butler Bass has written extensively on the changing culture of American Christianity. Her most recent book is called *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. Exploring the fields of history, psychology and ethics, of biblical and interfaith testimony, she writes about how gratitude has two critically important dimensions.

The first is the personal dimension. Gratitude is an emotion we experience as individuals, and which we can practice as a personal ethic. She notes that gratitude is sometimes mistaken for warm feelings about what we have, but that genuine gratitude is more of a spiritual awareness, the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, even *that we are*. In the multi-billion-year history of the universe, each one of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness, and has a story. The grateful life knows that life itself is pure gift. That's the personal dimension of gratitude.

The second dimension of being grateful, Bass argues, is often overlooked in our contemporary culture. That is the public dimension of gratitude. "Gratitude is inherently social; it always connects us as individuals to others," she writes. The grateful-feeling community can, and should, lead to a grateful society. Gratitude is joy, and gratitude is also justice."<sup>1</sup>

This is where, I believe, the church has a huge role to play during these days that are filled with tragedy, sadness and violence, with division and fear. During difficult days, a grateful community bears witness to the transcendent goodness of God that permeates all of life. We are united in thanksgiving.

Our friend, Rabbi Davis Strauss, testified to this public necessity of living gratefully a week ago Friday. After the horrific shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and in response to so many of us offering to stand in solidarity with our Jewish neighbors in this time of rising anti-Semitism, Mainline Reform Temple invited the ecumenical community to Shabbat services.

---

<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, P. 139, 42

That Friday night, November 9<sup>th</sup>, was the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht. That night the Nazi pogrom against the Jews burned down 270 synagogues, destroyed seven thousand Jewish businesses and carried away countless people to concentration camps. Rabbi David's grandparents lived in Stuttgart, across the street from their synagogue, and watched it go up in flames while soldiers and civilians violated their neighborhood and carried many away.

Last Friday, David read a first person account of that night written by his own father who was just fourteen at the time – recalling the fires, the broken windows, the staggering fear, the arrests. Many of us from Bryn Mawr were there – a handful of our choir joining voices with the Temple's choir, all of your pastors, and many church members.

David ended his remarks saying, “Eighty years ago on Kristallnacht neighbors burned our synagogues, hurled stones at our families' houses and carried our relatives away; but tonight our interfaith friends are with us, standing in solidarity with us, and the primary difference between then and now, is we are not alone. You have no idea how grateful we are for that.”

That is an example of the public dimension of being grateful, of letting our lives shine with thanksgiving that we are united one to another. As psychologist and Benedictine monk, David-Steindl-Rast has written, “If you are grateful, you are not fearful, and if you are not fearful, you are not violent. If you are grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not out of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you enjoy the differences between people, and you are respectful to everybody, and that changes this power pyramid under which we live.”<sup>2</sup>

When BMPC member, Peter Odiorne, stepped forward to create some videos for the capital campaign, one of the things for which I am grateful is the amazing drone shots of our church campus. I am grateful that the aerial view of the church includes the little flecks of color on the front lawn, which

---

<sup>2</sup> David Steindal-Rast quoted by Bass, p. 133.

was our T-shirt Memorial honoring those in our community who died to gun violence last year. Our little season of solidarity is captured there. And I am also grateful that the drone's pictures from above the church remind us that the sanctuary is cruciform.

In the tradition of church architecture through time, our primary space for worship is in the shape of the cross. When we gather for worship we literally gather inside the cross. On this Sunday before our national celebration of Thanksgiving, we are reminded how the cross of Jesus Christ unites us in the act of giving thanks. When anti-Semitism, and racism, and xenophobia and gun violence against the perceived other are on the rise, we Christians live a counter-cultural life of gratitude.

The unity that God gives to all of humanity in Christ is a gift for which we need more public expressions of thanksgiving these days. For Christian unity is above all found in the gift of human diversity. If any letter in the New Testament makes a case for the necessity for unity in our time, it is the letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters of Ephesians declare what God has done for us: God has chosen us before the foundation of the world to be God's own children. God has poured out grace upon us so that we know life itself is a gift. Our *whole* life is a gift from God. God gives us forgiveness, which sets us free to live into the future with a renewed sense of hope.

Then we come to this promising fourth chapter of Ephesians which says:

God has gifted us differently and has made us one  
with each other in Christ.

From different cultures and different traditions,

God has made us one in Christ.

From different backgrounds, and different religions,

God has made us one in Christ.

With different genders, different orientations,

God has made us one in Christ.

With different races and ethnicities,

God has made us one in Christ.

With different opinions and different perspectives,

God has made us one in Christ.  
Where there was animosity, God has brought peace.  
Where there was a dividing wall,  
God has torn it down.  
Where we were strangers, now we are friends.  
Where we were enemies,  
now we are brothers and sisters to each other.

The grace of God that is declared to us in Ephesians is a cosmic grace, not just a church grace. But this church, built in the shape of a cross, testifies to the universal truth of God's unifying grace. It is grace not just for us, or for a few, but grace for all. From one God comes one body, one people, one household, one human family. Both our public and our personal thanksgiving flows from this unity God gives through Jesus Christ.

Last November, Gabriel Kahane, was surprised to discover this deep gift of unity that he did not expect. Kahane is a singer and songwriter who lives in Brooklyn, and he wrote about a train trip he took across the country. In 2016, he wanted to write songs about travel, and he wanted something that would get him out of the bubble of New York City.

So he decided to ride the trains across the country and to leave the day after the presidential election, no matter who won. He took a small suitcase for a thirteen-day trip that would cover almost nine thousand miles, include boarding six Amtrak trains, and would pass through thirty-one states. He left his phone behind, and the only news he had was what he heard from passengers.

For those who have never taken an overnight train trip, he described how the dining car works. In the morning, you put in your reservation with the attendant, and then at meal-time you line up at the door. The seating is in tables of four, so if you are traveling alone you are seated with three others you do not know. Kahane had meals with almost 80 strangers. He shared a table with a nuclear engineer, truck drivers, retirees heading to and from the

Grand Canyon, a music publicist, a TV personality, a cowboy, a flight attendant, an actuary, an air-conditioner salesman.

He wrote of those experiences: “Where much of the digital world finds us sorting ourselves neatly into cultural and ideological silos, the train, in my experience, does precisely the opposite. It also acts, by some numinous, unseen force, as a kind of industrial-strength social lubricant. To be sure, I encountered people whose politics I found abhorrent, dangerous, and destructive, but in just about every instance, there was something about the person’s relationship to family, and loyalty to family, that I found deeply moving. That ability to connect across an ideological divide seemed predicated on the fact that we were quite literally breaking bread together.”<sup>3</sup>

What Kahane found on an Amtrak dining car is what God intends the world to find in the church. The church, in our cruciform shape, is meant to be a kind of Amtrak Dining Car: a place where we baptize diverse people, welcoming them into one household; a place where we break bread together and discover that in the broken body of Jesus Christ, there is a transcendent unity that makes of us one body.

At Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church we are united in Thanksgiving, celebrating the diversity of the human family, and in these days of deep division in our country this foundational gratitude is a call to be in deep relationship with one another across our differences:

to know one another,  
care for one another,  
to provide for one another,  
to pray for one another,  
to celebrate with one another,

and sometimes to cry with one another in a way that gives witness to the deep unity of the body of Christ.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/arts/gabriel-kahane-amtrak-8980-brooklyn-academy-of-music.html>

As members of God's diverse human family we are also called to welcome the stranger – for we were all strangers at one time or another. And we are sent forth from this cruciform gathering place to reach out in partnership with people very different from ourselves. We must never lose sight of this God-given unity that hovers over our church, broad enough to embrace all human diversity.

For this unity in Christ is the God-given source of all Thanksgiving, the foundation of a grateful life, the personal and the essentially public life of thanksgiving.

AMEN.