



Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Sunday, August 1, 2021
Reflection by Vicki Nelson

Show me you love me.

A man named John Kralik wrote a book a few years back called *A Simple Act of Gratitude*. It is about a man whose life is a disaster. He was miserable, broke, unhealthy, and on his second divorce living in a crummy apartment in LA with no air conditioning. He was an attorney who couldn't pay his employees their Christmas bonuses because his clients weren't paying their bills on time (or sometime at all). Then on New Years Day—that magic, cultural moment when we often resolve to change—he made a goal to write one thank you note everyday for the whole year—365 thank you notes! Ambitious for a guy who hours before had felt like he had nothing to be thankful for.

Since this whole service is focused on gratitude, you probably already know that this act completely transformed John's life (I mean...he wrote a whole book about it). That year of having an intentional gratitude practice taught him to value the good things and created a discipline of positive focus. He also shared that putting all that positivity out there resulted in a lot coming back to him.

Love and gratitude are wonderful emotions, but particularly so when they are shared—when we express them aloud. The phrases, "Thank you," "I really appreciate it," "I really appreciate you," and "I love you," are very powerful! These words have the potential to grow our love and strengthen our relationships. To not express those feelings aloud is, therefore, an opportunity lost. And yet, the truth is that many of us do not express our love and gratitude very much at all. Even as a church community we don't always say it enough.

It is not that we don't love one another, it is not that we don't appreciate each other and what we do for God's mission here at Knox-Met, it is just that we don't say it enough.

This has been made even harder over the last 17 months since we haven't seen each other. I for one know that there is still a ton of work happening behind the scenes here. But I haven't been able to see or experience much of it. Maybe you're like me, so I am going to take a quick minute to thank a few folks. Please know, that I will certainly miss people who are doing excellent work. These are the things that I have seen or heard about.

First, thanks again to Vanda, Dan, Cecilia, Hart, and the the Johnson Stroeder quintet for your help today.

Thanks to Liz Calam, who seems to be connected to a lot of things, but especially with worship planning and pastoral care. Her, along with a team have been making calls to Knox-Met folks throughout the pandemic, helping us stay connected.

Thanks to Carol Schick—not only for being the board chair, but for organizing the 4 week online learning opportunity about white privilege—Head, Heart, Hands, Feet.

Joan Garden and others have been involved with improvements to the Lorne Street entrance. Brian Brunskill has worked on restoring the Gothic windows. Thank you all.

Thanks to Donna Nelson, who serves as the church's Treasurer and also leads the team who is currently working on 28 refugee cases.

Thanks to the Re-opening team who have been keeping up on COVID precautions and planning and re-planning to bring us back together.

Hart Godden has worked on organ upgrades. Thank you.

Thanks to the board who has consistently met (virtually) throughout the pandemic to pivot and navigate and make sure our church is still functioning.

Thank you Bob Ivanochko, and others have tended to the peace garden.

Thanks to Cam & Cheryl who have done so much online kids programming.

Thanks to the Affirming committee for the wonderful celebration service in February and also being a presence at this year's Pride parade.

Thanks to Congregational Life committee for the successful online pie auction. Extra thank you to Julian for being a Facebook wizard.

Thanks to the dozens of coffee time guests—and to Dan for coordinating this. I don't know if I can go back to regular coffee time. I love having a theme!

A big thank you to Carol, David, Donna and Cam for participating in month-long United Church stewardship course I led. It was a big time commitment. Also that you for providing a mid-year financial update in June.

Finally, thanks to all of the folks who have kept up the spiritual practice of worship. Whether watching live on Facebook Sunday morning, or on youtube at a later time, this pandemic has rocked all of our routines, and I just want to acknowledge how great it is that you are committing time to this community and to your own spiritual growth.

You better believe that if we were all in the same room I would have you turn to the person beside you and say "thanks", but in the absence of that, say a silent thank you, or call someone out in the comments, or send a personal text message to some you feel grateful for today.

Expressing our love and gratitude in words is important and powerful. That's why parents always say, "what's the magic word?" when wanting their children to express gratitude. You want to know something else? It is also helps us, we who do the thanking! Indeed, there are many recent studies that show that focusing on our abundance and expressing our gratitude regularly make us happier and healthier as individuals and stronger as a church community. Diana Butler Bass, in her book called Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks, sums it up beautifully: "In addition to heart health, gratitude has also been linked to emotional

well-being, lower levels of anxiety and depression, decreased panic attacks and phobias, reduced risks of alcoholism and substance abuse, and longevity (yes, grateful people live longer). Researchers found that thankful people live happier lives as well.”¹ So bottom line—don’t be shy! Say thank you! Say it often!

While focusing on our gratitude and expressing it aloud is necessary, we all know, however, that it doesn’t end there. Love and gratitude must also be lived out—expressed in our actions. We all know of cases where someone says “I love you so much,” but their actions are not consistent with their words. They give a mixed message. And we also know that when messages are mixed, people believe our actions over our words. When I was a kid, my mom had one of those semi-political slogan tshirts from the Body Shop (anyone remember those?) that said, “What you do speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say”. That idea has always stuck with me.

With gratitude, like many things, it is key to both say it and live it.

So, how do we express our love and gratitude to God?

We can say it aloud and we do, regularly through prayers, storytelling, and singing. Indeed, when you think of it, our worship services are often full of words of thanksgiving. But what about our actions? How do we show God thanks and love? For instance, when we have those incredible moments of thankfulness, when our hearts are overflowing with gratefulness and praise, what can we do to express our love and gratitude to God?

Actually, Jesus had something to say about that. When asked once what God expected of a believer, he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And...” [here it comes] ... “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37, 39)

Neither of those two commands were new to Jesus’ listeners. What was new was the way Jesus linked the two, in essence, saying to people, “You want to express your love to God? Then love one another, love your neighbour. Want to express sincere gratitude for all that God has done for you? Then reach out and care for all those God loves.”

Caring for all those God loves can look many different ways...obviously. Like I mentioned above saying thank you to people in your life is one way. Being kind to strangers you meet—like frontline workers and others in customer service and hospitality.

Loving your neighbour can also look like caring for folks you do not see everyday. Like last Sunday, when Julian Wotherspoon bumped into a few folks outside Knox-Met on her way to read scripture. Some of these men you may recognize as pre-pandemic regular coffee hour attendees. These folks are experiencing housing insecurity, so joining in on Zoom isn't an option for them, nor is making coffee at home. Julian went out and grabbed them some coffee and snacks and had a quick visit. She let them know she will do it again next Sunday (which is today!), and likely into the future. If you want to contribute to this coffee fund, you can e-transfer Julian (Dan will pop her email address into the chat).

This example of mutual aid—political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing their political conditions. Loving their neighbour.

Another example are the community fridges around Regina. Cared for by volunteers and stocked by whomever, these pantries are filled and emptied many times each day. They are a physical expression of sharing abundance and God's blessings. A physical expression of gratitude and care.

In Matthew, when Jesus said "Love your neighbour as yourself" we know he also meant that broadly. Jesus wasn't just advocating for people who looked like him, prayed like him or lived next door. No, his love crossed all those lines.

Mission & Service is the United Church's expression of God's expansive love. Mission and Service is supported largely by donors like you and me, and it provides for a whole host of neighbours. Like right now in Cuba where the US embargo has led to monetary restructuring, and pushed the costs of basics—like food and utilities—through the roof. Regular Cubans are struggling, and protesting, and the United Church is providing financial support to our partners who are caring for seniors and folks with disabilities, they are teaching agro-ecology, and they are advocating for an end to the blockade. Similarly Mission

& Service funds are being used to provide vaccines for people living in vulnerable places, who do not have access to this life-saving science. Plus our church is writing letters and advocating to the Canadian government to both increase its funding to CoVax and share the thousands of extra doses we purchased for ourselves. It is about sharing our abundance AND sharing our political power to transform the world.

I give to Mission & Service because sharing my abundance to people and projects I will never see feels good. Just like saying thank you. Giving has positive impacts on my health too!

In today's lesson from John's gospel we get a similar message. Jesus is speaking to Peter. It is after the resurrection. Jesus is about to leave this earth and he wants to ensure that the disciples understand their mission. It is so important. Jesus asks Peter not once, not twice, but three times, "Do you love me?" And each time, Peter says aloud, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus wants Peter to show him and says, "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," "Feed my sheep." In other words, if Peter wants to express his love for Jesus, he should show him and love those whom Jesus loves.

You may recall that it wasn't so long before today's story that Peter was similarly asked about his relationship with Jesus. It was the night when Jesus was arrested. Then, also three times,

Peter denied he knew Jesus. In the days after the crucifixion, we can imagine that this would have played heavy on Peter's heart. But here is Jesus giving Peter a path for healing and an opportunity to get it right—to proclaim that not only does he know Jesus, but he loves him.

In the days to come we know that many people will come to faith in God, not just because of Peter's words, but because of how he lived his life from this moment on. His actions will speak loudly and reinforce his words. Eventually, Peter will give up his very life for the sake of Jesus.

My friends, today, God's love still needs flesh and bone. Today, God still needs people to show others love and care. Indeed, as Christ's followers in our time and place, we are called, in grateful response to God's love and abundance, to be nothing less than the hands and feet of God—making a difference in the lives of others, particularly those in need. God promises to be with us in this endeavour.

There is a wonderful story told of a little girl walking home from church one Sunday with her mom. At one point the little girl turns to her mother and says, "Mommy, the minister's sermon this morning confused me." The mother said, "Oh? Why is that?" The little girl replied, "Well, she said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?" The mother replied, "Yes, honey, that is true." "And the minister said that God lives in us. Is that true, Mommy?" The mother replied, "Yes, that is also true." "Well," said the little girl, "if God is bigger than us, and lives in us, wouldn't God show through?"

Today, on this Gratitude Sunday we take time to reflect on God's love, God's grace, and God's abundant blessings in our individual lives, and in the life of this faith community. Today, in a spirit of gratitude, we will pause to give God thanks for all that we have, and all that we are. But let us also take this day and the days ahead to show our gratitude by letting God's love shine through us to bless others.

Friends, may God's Spirit be with each of us and with our congregation as we seek to grow our faith, our love, and our impact in this coming year. The world is waiting. Because in life and death, and life beyond death, God is with us. Thanks be to God.