

# “Truly Blessed and Duly Grateful”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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**Romans 1:1-8a** <sup>1</sup> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, <sup>3</sup> the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit<sup>[a]</sup> of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name, <sup>6</sup> including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, <sup>7</sup> To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

I suppose schoolchildren still learn how to write letters. I hope they do. I hope they learn that you write the date, then you write “Dear So-and-so,” (the person you’re sending the letter to), and then you write your message. Next, you end your letter by writing, “Sincerely,” or “Cordially,” or “Love,” or something like that. Then you add your name as the person who wrote the letter.

That’s how we write letters. Even our emails follow that general format, though texts don’t.

In biblical times, though, the formula for letters was a little different.

The letter began with the name of the person who wrote it, then moved quickly to the name of the person receiving the letter. This opening “salutation” closed with a word of greeting. The first paragraph of a letter therefore looked something like this: “Lucius to Lydia. Greetings!”<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul is responsible for nearly one-quarter of the words in the New Testament. Paul used that formula in his many letters to the Christian churches scattered throughout Asia Minor, although he expanded the form somewhat. Paul opened almost all of his letters with words of prayerful thanks for his fellow believers... except Galatians. In his letter to the Galatians he was just downright angry with them. Listen to a few examples of thankfulness expressed in Paul’s greetings.

- In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote, “I give thanks to my God always for you ....”<sup>2</sup>
- Philippians begins with, “I thank my God for every remembrance of you...”<sup>3</sup>
- He wrote in 1 Thessalonians, “We always give thanks to God for all of you....”<sup>4</sup>
- In 2 Thessalonians he said, “We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters....”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Bartlett, Romans. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 12

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:4

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:3

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:2

<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:3

- Paul opened his little letter to Philemon with, “I thank my God always when I mention you in my prayers....<sup>6</sup>
- And as we heard from the opening verses of his letter to the Romans today, Paul told them plainly, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you....”<sup>7</sup>

And in this, my penultimate sermon as your pastor, that’s just what I want to say as well: “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.” I am thankful for the years I’ve had the privilege of serving you as we’ve pursued our collective journey of faith through the fellowship of this congregation.

You’ve allowed me to grow here. I was 34 years old when I began here. That may have seemed a little young to a few folks. All of this church’s other pastors had been in their fifties when they arrived. At the congregational meeting where 195 people voted to elect me as pastor, I presume it was my relative youth that had two people concerned enough to vote against calling me.

Before coming here I had spent five years as an Associate Pastor on a three-minister staff. Becoming a solo pastor and head of staff here meant I had a lot to learn. The biggest adjustment was learning the pace of preparing sermons and worship services every week when previously as an Associate Pastor I had been used to preaching every four to six weeks.

Other things I had to learn included:

- the faces and names and stories of hundreds of people;
- administrative aspects of operating a church;
- collaborating with and supervising other staff;
- developing relationships in this new community.

You allowed me to grow into this position. Thank you.

I’m also grateful for something else you did – you allowed my wife to find her own place in the life of this church. That wasn’t always how it used to happen. Until maybe a generation ago, it was commonly assumed that when you brought in a new pastor, you automatically got his wife’s time and talent as part of the deal. She’d be expected to be involved with every mission project and attend every social function and run every piece of equipment in the church kitchen and sing in the choir and teach Sunday school. In recent decades churches have seen that such an assumption shows disregard for the autonomy of the pastor’s spouse. Spouses nowadays often have their own careers. And like every one of you, a minister’s spouse should be free to choose her or his role in the church. I will speak for Mary in saying that she’s treasured the relationships she’s developed in Bible studies and our music ministry and serving in Vacation Bible School and directing church camps and other ways she’s chosen to be involved. She appreciates that she was invited to find, not expected to fill, various roles alongside you in this church’s life.

I add a personal word of thanks to Mary. Let me give you some background.

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<sup>6</sup> Philemon 4-5

<sup>7</sup> Romans 1:8 NRSV

During my last year of seminary I participated in a twice-weekly Advanced Preaching Seminar led by the Rev. Elam Davies. Mr. Davies was a nationally renowned preacher. He had retired as pastor of Chicago's historic Fourth Presbyterian Church on North Michigan Avenue. Because Mr. Davies didn't drive anymore, the seminary hired me to pick him up, drive him to the seminary, then drive him home again. The result was that I had an extra hour of conversation with Mr. Davies every time.

As a seminary student we would sometimes be asked to preach at area churches when their pastors were on vacation. It helped the church, it gave us experience preaching and leading worship, and it supplemented our meager student income. When I took this Advanced Preaching Seminar I probably hadn't preached more than maybe a dozen times.

But I mentioned to Mr. Davies that I had Mary read every one of my sermons and give me feedback. He turned to me and said with his thick Welsh accent, "Never let go of that gift from her – it is an inestimable treasure!"

Since then she has previewed every one of my sermons. She finds typos and other mistakes, of course. But she also helps me by pointing out potential pitfalls:

- she might suggest places where what people *hear* is likely to be different from what I intended;
- she might caution that the sermon takes a turn that's likely to leave people lost;
- she might question whether I've made an assumption that will leave listeners confused.

For nearly 40 years of patient, encouraging proofreading, to my wife I say, "Thank you." And trust me, for the edits I made because of her comments, you can say "Thank you," too!

Our boys, too, have been shaped by this church – really, the only church they had ever known. We arrived with 5-year-old Kevin and almost 3-year-old Eric and one on the way. Three months after our arrival you surprised us with a baby shower after the worship service, just weeks before our third son Brian was born. From that point, the boys grew into this church, through Sunday school and children's choir and Vacation Bible School, racing around Fellowship Hall with the other kids during coffee hour, going to church camp at The Highlands, Sunday nights with the youth fellowship group, mission trips to Michigan and Kentucky and Missouri and Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

You didn't hold them under the microscope of "preacher's kids" perfection. You let them become themselves. You loved them just like you love every other baby and toddler and child and youth, and that's why the children of our church literally skip into this building with smiles on their faces – it's another home for them... a home with a whole lot of people! (And cookies.)

You've watched my family grow up. That's another way of saying that we've aged before your eyes. But that whole time, you've allowed me the privilege of sharing in your lives:

- marriages performed and milestone anniversaries celebrated;

- the joy of births creating new families, followed by baptism into the Christian faith;
- the challenges of sending your children off to preschool, later sending them off to the workforce or military service or college;
- striving to find patience and endurance as you cared for aging parents;
- seeking a way to smooth out the path when a relationship became bumpy;
- finding solid ground when employment volatility rocked your world;
- standing in a hospital hallway praying before surgery;
- honored to have the privilege of offering words of comfort and hope as you grieved the death of friends or parents or spouses or children.

Reflecting on this privilege of being welcomed into your lives, I'm reminded of words Shakespeare penned in his play *Twelfth Night*: "I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks."

A song that you'll hear in a moment comes from this lovely book for adults that looks like a children's book – a book Mary and I are giving to the church library. The book is called "Grateful – A Song of Giving Thanks<sup>8</sup>." Illustrated by an artist in Finland, the words of the book are actually song lyrics; the book includes a CD of the song recorded by Art Garfunkel. The song includes the refrain, "Grateful, grateful, truly grateful I am. Grateful, grateful, truly blessed and duly grateful."

That's where I am in these days. That's where we all can strive to be all of our days: "Grateful, grateful." We pray to be keenly aware that we are, indeed, "truly blessed," and thus live our lives as children of God who are "duly grateful."

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<sup>8</sup> John Bucchino, Anna Liisa Hakkarainen, illus.. Grateful: A Song of Giving Thanks. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.