

“SEVEN WORDS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE:
I: THANKS!”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Epiphany Sunday

Colossians 3:12-17

Matthew 2:1-12

A number of years ago, I learned about a practice many people take part in at the start of each new year. They pick a word on which to focus for the year. It might be “joy” or “compassion” or “adventure” or whatever. It’s simply a word that helps them to shape their life in the year ahead.

Well, I remembered that practice when, last summer as I was laying out my worship plans for the year, I came across something that the great preacher Norman Vincent Peale once did. He preached a sermon series called “Seven Words That Can Change Your Life.” You know, I didn’t even read the sermons, I was just intrigued by the concept – and I ran with it.

So today is the start of a seven sermon journey on words that can change our lives. And what better way to start than with the word “Thanks!” Meister Eckhart

once said that “If the only prayer you ever say is ‘Thank you,’ that would be enough.”

And he was so right.

Ironically, saying “thanks” doesn’t come naturally to us. Writer James Moore, in a great sermon on gratitude, wrote this: “Thanks-giving, gratitude, appreciation – whatever you want to call it – is learned. We come into the world selfishly screaming our demands. Now, please don’t misunderstand me (he writes). I love babies. They are absolutely wonderful – some of God’s greatest miracles. But anybody who has ever been around a newborn baby knows that babies come into the world self-centered and impatient. They come into the world screaming, ‘Hold me, feed me, burp me, change me, rock me, walk me, sing to me – and do it right now!’ And this is okay, because they are babies and that’s the only way they can communicate – indeed, the only way they can survive. But, as time goes by, they grow up, and as they mature – if all goes well – they learn how to be grateful, how to be appreciative, how to say thanks.” (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, “The Attitude of Gratitude,” p. 16)

Moore is right. We have to learn how to be grateful, and thankfully, most of us have, but oh how easy it is to forget sometimes. How easy it is to be focused more on ourselves, than on the blessings we've been given.

Which brings us, in a strange way, to this morning's Gospel lesson, the scripture for Epiphany Sunday – the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus. Front and center in this story is a man who is utterly consumed with himself – a man by the name of Herod. He is narcissistic to the max. It's all about him and his power. It's all about having everything he wants and dominating everyone else. He is sly and tricky and plays by his own rules.

And then one day, a child is born, and it's like the rug is pulled out from under Herod. They're calling this baby the Messiah. They're saying he's the one prophets have talked about for centuries. They're calling him "King." And Herod can't take it. He's the ruler, he's the one in charge, he calls all the shots, how dare anyone call someone else "King."

He's got to do something about it, and then lo and behold, the answer seems to be laid in his lap. He hears about these learned individuals, these magi,

who've studied prophecies and followed signs, and have come to see this newborn baby. Here's Herod's chance to get him, so slyly (at least he thinks), he has a conversation with the magi.

He knows the baby has been born in Bethlehem, so he entreats them to go and find him, and when they do, to let him know where the baby is, so he can go and worship him as well. He took them for fools, and thought his little act would persuade them to do his bidding.

Well, it didn't turn out exactly as he hoped, because the Magi did find that precious baby, but when they did their thoughts were not to run right back to Herod and report in, no, here's what happened. They fell to their knees in awe and gratitude for this precious gift from God.

Because, you see, they knew what a gift Jesus was. They had read the prophecies, they saw the signs. They knew he was born a king like no other. Not a king who would reign on a throne caring only for himself and what he could get, but a king who would walk the streets, live among the people, and give everything for their sake.

So filled with thanksgiving were they, that they gave that baby precious gifts – gold (a gift of perfection for the perfect Son of God), frankincense (a sign of the incense of prayer and the priesthood), and myrrh (a sign of what was to come, his death on a cross for the sins of the world).

The magi laid down their gift of thanks, and then, having been warned in a dream to go home by another way, they did just that – leaving old Herod in the lurch. Herod, sadly, would go on to do unspeakable things, which we talked about last week – his having all the children under two in that area killed.

But the magi went home wrapped in thankfulness, focused on the gift of the newborn King into a world that desperately needed him. While Herod was wrapped in anger and self-centeredness, the Magi were wrapped in thankfulness and joy. Oh my friends, is there any question which is the better way to live and to know life in all its fullness?

What an invitation for us today to give thanks always, to have the first word on our lips everyday to be “Thanks!” It will indeed change the way we face our

days. It will remind us that life is not all about getting and taking, but about what we have already received.

And you and I have received so much, been blessed in abundance. We have life and health, family and friends, work and leisure – oh, the list goes on and on. Yet, in the hustle and bustle of life, we sometimes forget that.

Well, the first of the year is a good time to remember. To intentionally say “thanks” at the start of every morning, “Thank you, God” for all that you’ve given me. “Thank you, God” for loving me. “Thank you, God” for being with me every moment of my life, for walking with me in good times and bad, for guiding me, showing me the way. “Thank you, God.”

There are so many ways we can do that. A whispered prayer at the start of the day. A time of silence filled with thoughts of God’s blessings in our lives. Writing in a gratitude journal. Sharing thankfulness with a prayer partner, family member or friend. Even taking some action to convey your thanks.

Friends, I am convinced we can change our very lives if saying “thanks” is first on our lips. I think that, if it is, we’ll begin to see more and more all of the blessings that come upon us every single day – things we may not see so clearly right now.

I want to finish by reminding you of some other gifts of thankfulness, told in a very famous story by O’Henry called “The Gift of the Magi.” Do you remember it? It’s the story of a young couple named Jim and Della, struggling to get by on Jim’s salary of just twenty dollars a week. They live in a rundown apartment and have little but they are madly in love with each other.

Well, Christmas time rolls around, and Della weeps over the fact that all she has is \$1.87 with which to buy her Jim a Christmas present. What will \$1.87 buy? Nothing. She was crestfallen.

With her head held down in weeping, it suddenly occurred to her that there was something she could do to get more money. She had long, beautiful hair – hair that her Jim adored. But Della realized that she could get her hair cut and sell that beautiful hair for a wig. Which is exactly what she did. She sold her long hair for

\$20, and now she had \$21.87 with which to buy her Jim a gift – and she knew just what she was going to buy.

It was a chain and fob for the precious pocket watch his grandfather had given him – probably their most valuable and prized possession. Della went to the jewelry store and bought that gift for \$21 and couldn't wait to give it to her darling husband.

When she got home and looked in the mirror at her short hair, she knew it would be shocking to Jim, who loved her long, flowing locks. So she curled her hair as best she could, made it look as cute as possible, and waited.

Not much later, Jim comes in the door, sees her, and stops in his tracks. He can't believe his eyes, but blessedly, he says nothing. O'Henry said it like this: "He was quiet as a hunting dog when it is near a bird. His eyes looked strangely at Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not understand. It filled her with fear. It was not anger, nor surprise, not anything she had been ready for. He simply looked at her with a strange expression on his face."

Della went to him and asked him not to look at her like that, because it was Christmas, and she so wanted to give him a gift, that she had sold her hair. But, she reminded him, it would grow back again. Don't worry.

Standing back, Jim took a package out of his pocket and then looked at Della and reminded her that nothing could ever change his love for her, especially not short hair. But he said, if you open the package, you'll understand my reaction.

Inside the package was a beautiful comb Della had admired in a store window, a comb to hold back her long, flowing hair. Tears of gratitude trickled down her face, as she reminded Jim that her long hair would grow back in no time. And then suddenly, she remembered his gift.

She took it out of her pocket and lovingly gave him that beautiful chain and fob for his grandfather's pocket watch. She was so happy and said to him that he'd be looking at his watch a hundred times a day now – it was so grand! She couldn't wait and told him to get his watch so they could attach the chain and fob.

But Jim looked down into his bride's eyes and told her that he had sold that watch to buy her the comb for her hair. (O'Henry, *The Gift of the Magi*)

Oh, dear friends, that's sacrificial love, that's a blessing more precious than anything else. That's the kind of love God has given us in Christ Jesus – a gift that cares more for us than we can possibly understand, a gift that gives us all that we need and more, a gift that most of all, offered himself as a sacrifice, that we might have life – real life, true life, abundant life, eternal life.

How can we not start everyday by saying “thanks”? May we do that today, and every day in this new year. May it be so.

Amen.