

Week 2, Introduction and Overview **“Gratitude for Our Church”**

Introduction:

In the second week of this series, our focus shifts from God’s Creation to our particular church. The goal is to help people reflect on what they appreciate about their church. I would encourage the congregation to think broadly about all the aspects of their church which they love. For example, it could be...

- the sanctuary, stained glass windows, the organ, the gym or fellowship hall, etc.
- Things appreciated might be traditions in the church, such as an Easter Egg hunt on the church grounds, an annual ice cream social, or “trunk or treat” program, etc.
- certain church programs, such as VBS, a childcare center, a regular commitment to help prepare a meal at a local soup kitchen, etc.
- Encourage the congregation to lift up individual persons in the church. The Pastor, Music Director, and other staff are obvious persons to be lifted up.
- But, also encourage the congregation to think beyond those leaders to others, such as a volunteer group of men who always wash dishes after a church function, someone who volunteers to tend the flowers and landscaping outside the church, someone who has provided important leadership on a committee, a faithful nursery care worker, or perhaps an older person who is like a grandparent to all of the children and youth, etc.

Again, the goal is to help the congregation reflect and identify the people, programs, and characteristics that make their church special—that makes this faith community feel like home. The idea is to stimulate the congregation to reflect on what their church means to them.

Preparation:

If you haven’t done so already, recruit 1-2 volunteers to come forward and share how much their church means to them during the Week 2 Worship Service. An alternative approach would be to video record your volunteer speakers sometime before the service and then share the video during the worship service.

Include a bulletin insert for parishioners to write down what it is that they really appreciate about their church. This insert could be a simple index card, or it could be a piece of construction paper cut out in the image of a church. (It doesn’t necessarily have to be a silhouette of your particular church.)

Ideas for Social Media

Again, as with the first week, I encourage the use of social media and your church website to promote the “Gratitude, Prayer, Re-commitment” series. You could upload videos of persons sharing what they really like about their church.

You might also ask for observations from people in your community who do not attend your church. For example, you could try to cultivate responses on Facebook, such as, “I attend the Baptist Church, but one of the things I really appreciate about [Name] UMC is the garage sale every summer.” If you try this, it would probably help to “prime the pump” by encouraging people you know, but who do not attend your church, to make a post. Or, perhaps you know another pastor in town, who might encourage his or her congregation to help out with this promotion. If you do try this, be sure to monitor the page closely to eliminate negative comments from trolls, who might use the opportunity to just be mean and ugly.

Looking Ahead to Week 3

The gratitude focus for Week 3 will be people in our lives whom we especially appreciate. These people could be family members: parents, children, grandchildren, aunts and uncles, etc. But, you should encourage the congregation to broaden their scope to include others, such as friends, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, mentors, work colleagues, neighbors, etc.

One option for Week 3 is to have everyone in the congregation bring a picture of someone in their life for whom they are especially grateful. The pictures can be any size or shape, from a large framed picture to a small photograph, etc. If you take this option, then be sure to include an index card or some similar insert in the bulletin for those who forgot to bring a photograph to write the name of persons whom they are especially grateful.

I will talk more about this option under Week 3, but the important thing is to get the word out to your congregation **before** the service, during Week 2 and maybe even Week 1.

Week 2 –Worship Resources

Suggestions for the Altar

Remembering that this week our focus is on being grateful for our church and all of its positives, I recommend decorating the Altar with objects that the congregation will immediately associate with their faith community. So, if your church has a pictorial directory, that would be an excellent object for the Altar. Many churches have a big Church Bible that would be very appropriate.

Think also about symbols for specific ministries within your congregation. If your church has an active VIM program, then work gloves, a hammer, screwdriver, and trowel would be excellent. If you have a Hand Bell Choir, then include a hand bell and a pair of gloves. If your congregation is known for the meals which it prepares, either as a ministry or as social opportunities, then add a pot, ladle, and other kitchen items. Consider including something from your VBS, as well as historic pictures of the church and congregation. In the bulletin, you might include a short description of everything that you have place on the Altar table and what it symbolizes about this church.

* Call To Worship

Leader: I was glad when they said unto me,

People: “Let us go to the house of the Lord

Leader: For the Lord is good;

People: God’s steadfast love endures forever, and God’s faithfulness is to all generations.

Leader: Come, let us praise God who loves us!

People: Let us worship together as God’s community of faith.

-- Based upon Psalms 122, 100, and 150

Prayer

O Loving God, you invite us to live our faith together in communities of mutual love and support. We give you special thanks for our church and for all its people. We are also thankful for those who came before us, beginning with our congregation’s original founders. We remember with gratitude those who continued the work after the original founders. Today, we enjoy the foundation built by all who came before us. We seek to build on this legacy, by following faithfully in the footsteps of Christ Jesus. O Gracious God, send your Holy Spirit down upon us to inspire, guide, and strengthen all of us and this faith community. This we ask, in the name of Christ. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

O Gracious God, in gratitude for your abundant love, we lift up these financial offerings for the ministry and mission of this church. Send your Holy Spirit to guide the minds that administer these funds. May these funds be used wisely and compassionately for ministries of mercy that care for those who are hurting; for ministries of justice that work to establish your Kingdom throughout the world; and for ministries that help us grow spiritually closer to you. In Christ's name, Amen.

Children's Time

This Children's Time follows the same format & approach as the Children's Time from Week 1.

Objects:

1. A few pictures and symbols of your church. If you decorated the Altar with these pictures and symbols (See "Suggestions for the Altar" above), use them.
2. Index cards and an assistant to record the things children say.

Outline:

1. "Girls and boys, today I would like for us to talk about all of the things we like about our church." Then, either discuss the pictures and symbols that you have gathered for Children's Time or take them to the Altar table to discuss how it has been decorated.
2. Ask the children if they can think of things they are grateful for. (You may have to coach them a bit.) Have your assistant write down everyone's responses on a separate index card and give the card to the child whose ideas are on that particular card.
3. Say: "Boys and girls, it is very important that we give God thanks for all of the things we are grateful for. So, I'm going to suggest that we place these pictures and cards on our Altar to show God how grateful we are for our church."
4. Then, ask the children to bow while you lift up a brief prayer of thanksgiving for their church.

The Proclamation: “Why I am Grateful for Our Church”

Suggested Scripture and Sermon Title:

Philippians 1:3-11

Theme:

“Gratitude for Our Church”

Scripture Analysis

It seems clear that Paul had differing relationships with the churches he established. For instance, his relationship with the Church in Corinth was rocky and troublesome, to say the least. We have two letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, although there is good textual evidence for at least a third letter. In the material we have, Paul is always trying to serve as peacemaker—resolving conflicts and quarrels within the community. He is also constantly correcting theological errors and reminding the Corinthians that they are supposed to be a community, cares for and supports one another. Finally, Paul is frequently on the defensive, having to justify his spiritual and theological authority.

By contrast, I like to think of our scripture as a love letter that the Apostle Paul writes to the Church of Philippi. Even in a casual reading, Paul’s love and admiration for the Philippians shines brightly through the text. In my own ministry, I have frequently used this text as the basis for a farewell sermon when departing a particular congregation.

I suggest this text for Week 2 because I think the homiletical goal this week should be lifting up and affirming the strengths of your congregation. That is, the goal should be to invite the faith community to remember why they attend this particular church and not some other. What is it about this congregation that makes it feel like “home”?

So, when preaching from this text, I have always tried to follow the model of the Apostle Paul. Just as Paul wrote an ecclesiastical love letter to the Philippians, I have tried to preach an ecclesiastical love letter to my congregation. I have drawn a comparison between how Paul felt about the Philippians, and how I was feeling about my congregation. I tried to recognize and give thanks for that community’s strengths; for all of their significant ministries; and examples of their graciousness towards me and one another.

In our text, Paul begins with a typical greeting which he used in most of his letters to different churches. Then, in verses 3-8, he launches into an unqualified and intensely personal thanksgiving for the Philippian faith community. In rapid succession, he expresses:

1. Thankfulness (verse 3)
2. Joy (verse 4)
3. Gratitude (verse 5)
4. Confidence (verse 6)
5. affection (verse 7)
6. an intense longing for them (verse 8)

Of particular note for our stewardship theme is Paul's assertion in verse 5; "[I am thankful and joyful] because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." What could Paul possibly mean by the phrase, "sharing in the gospel"? The British Methodist Biblical scholar, Morna D. Hooker, has an interesting suggestion at this point. First, she reminds us that we know from other places in scripture that the Philippians were significant financial supporters of Paul and his ministry.

Then, Professor Hooker suggests that by "sharing in the gospel," Paul is referring to the Philippians' financial support of his ministry. She writes, "If Paul is thinking of their [financial] gift, then it is interesting to note the way in which he refers to it: By their giving the Philippians have become partners *in the gospel*. What they have given is not a personal gift to Paul..., but rather a means whereby they share in the task of spreading the good news."¹

Continuing along Professor Hooker's line of reasoning, in verse 6, Paul calls their generosity a "good work." However, the Philippians themselves are not responsible for this good work. Instead, it was God, who will bring this good work to completion in them by the "day of Jesus Christ."

In verse 8, Paul acknowledges that he "longs for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus." In other words, Paul's affection for the Philippians is no mere human emotion. Instead, it is rooted in the love and compassion of Christ, himself.

In the final verses of this section (9-11), Paul offers up an intercessory prayer on behalf of the Philippian church. He prays that their love may overflow more and more; that this love may be the source of their increasing knowledge and insight into what is best, so that they be pure and blameless on the day of Christ.

As I said, I think that this is a wonderful scripture for the objectives of Week 2. Until I began preparing this resource, I had never really thought about Paul's claim that the Philippians have participated indirectly in his ministry through their generous financial support. However, I think that it may be powerful to develop this line of thought, especially in a stewardship sermon centering on celebrating a local church, its people and all of its existing ministries.

Before concluding this analysis, I need to acknowledge that sometimes we are asked to serve churches that are more like Paul's Corinthian church than his Philippian one. I don't recommend ignoring or varnishing your pastoral reality. Always in the pulpit, we must be honest and preach with the highest integrity.

But even if you have a Corinthian church, try to find some of the strengths which the congregation possesses. I think most churches have some inherent strengths and possibilities. This would be a good time to remind your congregation that they do have positives. I personally believe that the Apostle Paul would have some positives about the Corinthian church, if we could ask him. Another take would be to lift the Philippians up as a model of a church for all of us—especially 'Corinthian churches'—to aspire towards becoming.

¹Morna D. Hooker, Commentary on “The Epistle to the Philippians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10. Her emphasis.

Potential Sermon Illustrations

As noted last in my comments about preaching last week, Clayton Smith urges clergy to use self-disclosure in stewardship sermons. Reflecting on his own pastoral experiences, Smith says, “Self-disclosure effectively created a climate of openness, trust, empathy, and acceptance.”¹

I tend to agree with Smith on this point, especially when considering our objectives for the proclamation in Week 2. In this context, I believe that the most effective illustrations should come from your heart, as you reflect on your ministerial context. Remembering that this sermon is sort of a “love letter” to your congregation, the best illustration will lift up and celebrate all of the positive attributions your community of faith.

What are the ministries and programs that you feel especially proud of and would like to celebrate? What are special traditions or characteristics of your church that you cherish? Try to lift up and celebrate as many people as you can, who volunteer in different areas. Try to be all inclusive and positive.

As part of your sermon, you also might consider casting a vision of how much more the church could do in ministry in the future, if it had additional income through increased giving.

¹ Clayton Smith, *Propel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 56.