

Week 1, Introduction and Overview

“Gratitude for God’s Good Creation and for Life itself”

Introduction:

This four-week sermon series contains a “flow of gratitude,” beginning generically and moving to gratitude specifically for your church(es) and others. This week begins somewhat broadly. Ask the congregation to reflect on God’s Good Creation as well as on gift of life itself, which is also a gift from God. We need to be grateful for all of God’s blessings.

I suggest beginning this series with a challenge to the congregation. Challenge your parishioners to keep a daily “gratitude journal” during the four weeks of this stewardship campaign. For suggestions on what to focus on each week in the daily gratitude journaling, please refer to the “Suggestions for keeping a Daily Gratitude Journal” file, which is included in this packet.

Preparation:

Preparation is especially important before launching a stewardship campaign. Before the first worship service, members of your congregation should have received a letter announcing the campaign. In addition to the letter, include the *estimate of giving* card. If your church has a regular newsletter, you could also use the newsletter to announce the campaign. For sample letters, pledge card, and newsletter article, please refer to the “Prelaunch Resources” file, included with this packet.

For each of the four worship services, try to include time for 1-2 parishioners to come forward and share how much their church means to them. If possible, consider video recording these testimonies for use on social media, provided you already have the presenters’ permission to be recorded and posted.

It’s best to try and schedule those “testimonies” in advance, before the campaign begins with the first worship service.

I suggest designating a “gratitude wall” somewhere near the principal entrance/exit to the Sanctuary. This could be either a bulletin board or a plain wall (that you don’t mind putting scotch tape or pins in). For each of the first three Sunday’s, your congregation will be asked to name some things they are grateful for. Each Sunday, focus of gratitude will be different. For the first week, the focus is on gratitude for the gift of life and for God’s good creation.

The idea here is that members will write down some of what they are grateful for and affix their notes to the “gratitude wall.” Each of the three weeks, there should be some sort of card inserted into the bulletin for everyone to write what they are grateful for. The simplest approach is just to insert an index card. These cards could be all white or you could use different colored cards, with a different color for each of the three weeks.

If you are feeling especially ambitious, you could use some different colored construction paper with a different shape for each week. For example, you might use a light green construction paper, cut in the shape of tree leaves for Week 1 and a different color of construction paper cut

into the shape of a church and steeple for Week 2. Make sure to use a light colored paper so that the words are easily legible.

There are several approaches to collecting everyone's card and getting them posted on the gratitude wall. Here are two:

1. Recruit volunteers who are ready at the end of the service to take people's cards as they exit the service and then post them on the board.
2. Have everyone drop their gratitude card in the offering plate and then have someone post the cards on the gratitude board after the service. This could be a great job for your youth group or, for you yourself.

Ideas for Social Media

One possibility for promoting your stewardship campaign would be to video record different members of your congregation before the first Sunday. In this video recording, ask them one question for Week 1: "Tell me something about God's Creation that you especially appreciate." They can say anything, from ice cream to Gila monsters. I have found that it is best to ask the interviewee the question off camera; let them think about it for a minute; then record them after they have their answer.

You don't need a great deal of technology or expertise to make this kind of video. I have done the recording with my smart phone, stopping the recording after every response, then restarting it when I interview the next person. Don't forget to include children and youth—provided that you have their parents' permission.

Keep the video short, no more than 3 minutes. This video can be used in several ways:

1. As a way to introduce the sermon during the worship service
2. As a promotion for your service, if your church uses Facebook or some other social media
3. On your website.
4. All of the above.

Week 1 –Worship Resources

Suggestions for the Altar

Consider having the Altar decorated specifically for each week's theme during this campaign. For Week 1, the theme is gratitude for God's Good Creation and for life itself. One approach would be to decorate the Altar with examples of Creation. So, one could just decorate the Altar with abundant flowers. Another option would be to decorate with different types of plants, both "wild" and cultivated. If this series takes place in the Fall, a harvest cornucopia would be perfect.

If your church does not already have an "Altar Committee," I suggest recruiting different individuals or groups to each decorate the Altar for one of the four Sunday's. While there is always the invitation for the pastor to do it him- or herself, I have discovered that the more tasks and responsibilities you can give to different members of your church, the more "buy-in" you gain for what you are trying to accomplish as the Pastoral Leader.

* Call To Worship

L – We gather this morning as a grateful people who have received many gifts from God.

P – God created this beautiful natural world to sustain us, and then gave each of us the precious gift of life.

L – We are grateful for all sorts of plants: for peaches and strawberries, for roses and orchids, for green grass and colorful trees, for coffee beans as well as cacao beans, which make chocolate.

P – We are also grateful for all sorts of animals: for giraffes, deer, antelope, eagles, geckos, praying mantises, and cows; as well as dogs, cats, bunnies, and all of our other pets.

L – We are thankful for the people around us.

P – We are thankful for families and neighbors and so many friends.

L – Come, let us join to praise and worship God who gives us so many blessings.

P – We worship with glad and grateful hearts for all that God gives.

Prayer

"O God of Abundance, today we especially remember all of the blessings that you have given us.

You created the entire natural world, with all of its wonderful species of plants and animals.

We received the gift of life itself from you.

We are also very thankful for the gift of family and friends.

We are thankful for this spiritual community, [name of your church], which sustains us in good times and bad; through the joys of life and through life's sorrows.

Finally, we give a special thanks for your love, manifested in the teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Help us to always reflect your love as his disciples.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

O Gracious God, in gratitude for your abundant love, we lift up these financial offerings, praying that they may be used to proclaim your love for all, especially those who are hurting from poverty or loneliness or depression or grief or injustice. In Christ's name, Amen.

Children's Time

Objects:

1. pictures of things you are grateful for, personally: family members, a beloved pet, a sunrise, etc. Take care to use only pictures of objects that small children can comprehend. In other words, try to avoid abstract things, such as "freedom," even though you may feel especially grateful for them.
2. Index cards and an assistant to record the things children will lift up.

Outline:

1. "Girls and boys, today I would like for us to discuss a very important word: grateful. It's a hard word to define, so I am going to give you some examples of things that I am grateful for.
2. Show the children the pictures of things that you are grateful for.
3. Ask the children if they can think of things they are grateful for. 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.
4. 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."
5. Lead the children to the Altar and have them form a circle or semi-circle around the table. Put your pictures on the Altar and then encourage the kids to put their index cards on the Altar. (If a kid wants to keep their card, don't fight them.)
6. Then, ask the children to bow while you lift up a brief prayers of thanksgiving.

The Proclamation: “A Grateful Leper”

Suggested Scripture and Sermon Title:

Luke 17:11-19

“A Grateful Leper”

Theme:

“Gratitude for God’s Creation and for the Gift of Life Itself”

Scripture Analysis

The story of the 10 lepers healed by Jesus offers an interesting framework for our reflections on gratitude. The story begins with Jesus, along with his disciples and other followers, traveling along a road. As they enter a village, they were approached by a group of 10 lepers. In the New Testament, the word, “leper,” is a generic term that can refer to a range of dermatological conditions that disfigure the skin and features of an individual person. These conditions can also cause intense physical pain. Some of these ailments are fairly contagious.

R. K. Harrison speculates that in Luke 17, the leprosy referred to was most likely a form of vitiligo, also known as leukoderma. This skin disorder is characterized by smooth, white patches which disfigure the skin, caused by a loss of the natural pigment. Harrison speculates further that this condition may be psychogenic, that is caused by psychological trauma, or disorder, rather than having a physical origin. Finally Harrison suggests that, if this condition was indeed psychogenic, then Jesus’ love and attention may have provided the emotional stimulus for the healing which takes place in the story.¹

Regardless of the actual dermatological condition suffered by the 10 lepers, the disease made them social outcasts because of concerns that their condition was contagious. Even worse a person with leprosy was considered religiously unclean with Judaism. So, lepers usually lived in “colonies,” isolated from others.

Luke tells us that the 10 lepers approached Jesus and his entourage, taking care to maintain the religiously prescribed distance from non-infected persons. The lepers called to Jesus, saying: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” As Alan Culpepper notes: “The call for mercy would ordinarily have been a request for alms, but ... it is possible that the request for mercy should be understood as a request for healing.”²

Jesus responds to the lepers’ plea with the words: “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (v. 14). Jewish law dictated that someone who was healed from leprosy was required to go and show him- or herself to a priest, so that the healing could be verified and the healed person could be welcomed back into the community. By instructing the lepers to seek out a priest, Jesus implies that he will heal the lepers in the process. And, as the lepers made their way to the priest, they were healed and made whole.

What happens next is very interesting. When one of the lepers realized that he had been healed, he turned around and returned to Jesus. The remaining nine never returned to Jesus. We are left to assume that after showing themselves to the priest, they returned to their families. When the one leper returns to Jesus, he praises God, “with a loud voice,” and then “prostrated

himself at Jesus' feet and thanked Jesus" (v. 15-16a). At this point, Luke, the gospel writer, introduces a surprising new twist by observing that the leper who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan (v. 16b).

In the Bible, the Samaritans were deeply despised by Jews. Although both Jews and Samaritans shared a similar faith and similar sacred texts, they disagreed bitterly over how to interpret God's Holy Word. The implications of these disagreements shaped how they lived their lives. For the Samaritans, Mt. Gerizim should be the center of worship, whereas for the Jews the center of worship was the Temple in Jerusalem. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was so great that Jews avoided all social contact with Samaritans. They avoided even talking with Samaritans, due to their fear of becoming ritually impure.

So, it is a special, ironic touch that the lone leper who returns to thank Jesus and praise God is not a Jew—but, rather, a Samaritan. The story of the 10 lepers ends with Jesus asking three rhetorical questions: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (vv. 17-18)

As noted earlier, this story of the 10 lepers offers a profound framework for our reflections on gratitude as an expression of faith. We live in a culture which strongly promotes self-reliance and taking care of ourselves. While there is nothing wrong with this cultural value per se, there remains a danger that in striving for self-reliance, we begin to take credit for all of our accomplishments, without acknowledging that we greatly benefit from a supportive social network and a generous God.

We begin to take for granted the many gifts that we have received from God, including the gift of life; all of our intelligence and talents, as well as physical strength and stamina. We take for granted the support of our family and circle of friends. Even the drive to focus and work hard is not something that we do by ourselves, rather to be driven and work hard is a gift from God.

Reflecting on the story of the 10 lepers, the biblical scholar Alan Culpepper writes:

"This story also challenges us to regard gratitude as an expression of faith. ... Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper."³

¹ R. K. Harrison, "Leprosy," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 3: 111-113.

² R. Alan Culpepper, Commentary on Luke in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9.

³ Ibid.

Potential Sermon Illustrations

Clayton Smith asserts in his book, *Propel*, that self-disclosure is perhaps the most effective way to preach financial stewardship sermons. He writes, "...the materials that focus on one's personal experience help the people hear more effectively. They are allowed to overhear instead of being confronted directly." (Abingdon, 2015, p. 62) Following Smith here, the best

Illustrations for this Sunday would be to talk about those things in life for which you are especially grateful.

So, here's an illustration of an illustration. This illustration focuses on gratitude for family and nature:

"Some years ago, my brother and my son and I went backpacking on the Appalachian Trail. Late one afternoon, we had to go up and over Old Baldy mountain. The mountain is called "Old Baldy" because the very top part of the mountain has no natural tree growth. Instead, it is covered by this lush, green meadow. After we summited, we stopped to take a break and just look around at the beautiful landscape stretching beneath our feet in all directions. Originally, our plan was to hike for another 3 miles to a backpackers' shelter. Since it was late, we decided to stop for the day and camp on top of the mountain.

"So, we pitched our tents, fixed our evening meal, and completed all the other necessary chores. Then, as dusk was setting in, we spread our sleeping bags out on the fresh, cool grass and laid down, staring up at the sky. As night approached, one by one, the stars began to sparkle. When night had fully settled in, we stared up at the night-time sky. It was a beautiful night. The Milky Way was clearly visible, stretching across the night sky from one side to the other. We were gazing at millions and millions of stars.

"Even though some years have passed since this evening, I still remember some of my thoughts as I lay on my back, looking up at the night sky. The closest star to us is *Proxima Centauri*. It is 4.37 light years away. One light year is slightly less than 6 trillion miles. As I reflected on all of this, I felt overwhelmed by how vast our universe is and how small and insignificant I am. Yet, even still, we know that God loves us, personally, regardless of how insignificant we are in comparison to the vastness of the universe.

"As I reflected, I was suddenly overwhelmed with this deep and all-encompassing wave of gratitude. I was grateful for God's good creation—for the lush, green grass; for the beauty of the Appalachian mountains; for the stars and the vastness of the universe. I was also so grateful for my family—for my brother and son enjoying this evening with me; for my wife, my daughter, my sister, and all the other family members who were not on this trip with me. I was so grateful for life itself and for the opportunity and the ability to take this backpacking trip. Finally, I felt a rush of gratitude, as I thought about God and my assurance that God loves me, even me, more deeply than I will ever be able to fully comprehend."

Gratitude...Prayer...Re-commitment
Sermon Overview Table

Week	Theme	Scripture	Sermon Title
1	Gratitude for God's Creation and for Life Itself	Luke 17:11-19	"A Grateful Leper"
2	Gratitude for our church and its people	Philippians 1:3-11	"Why I am Grateful for My Church"
3	We respond to God's generosity by giving generously to the church. When we give generously, we are transformed	Luke 19:1-10	"The Transformation of Zaccheus"
4	There is a profound joy in giving freely and generously.	Mark 12:41-44	"What the Widow Knew"

Suggestions for Keeping a Daily Gratitude Journal During this Series

Week	Theme	Activity
1	“Gratitude for Creation and for Life itself”	Throughout the week, spend 10 prayerful minutes of gratitude each day simply thinking about all that God has given us, especially our very lives. Also, give thanks for all of the aspects of nature that you really enjoy, such as types of animals and plants, as well as things like beautiful sunsets, mountains, rainbows, special places that bring you special joy. Each day, make a list of 3-5 things that you are especially grateful for.
2	“Gratitude for our Church”	During this week, continue spending 10 prayerful minutes of gratitude each day. However, this week think about our church and its people. What aspects of our church do you especially appreciate? For example, is it our church musicians, our outreach ministries, some place in our building, one of our recurring traditions, etc. Think about the people in our church. Who are some of the special people in our church? For instance, is it a Sunday-School teacher, an usher, the pastor, a special staff member, someone whom you always look for after worship? Each day, make a list of 3-5 things or persons for which you are especially grateful. If some of your gratitude centers on a particular person, then consider sending a card or email or text, telling them how grateful you are that they belong to our church?
3	“Gratitude for the special people in our lives?”	Continue your gratitude reflections. This week spend 10 prayerful minutes of gratitude thinking about the people who have had a special impact on your life. (Consider both influential people who are dead or still living.) What is it about these persons that makes them so significant in your life? Consider family members, as well as friends, colleagues, and people from your church. Write notes/texts/emails to at least three of them.
4	“The Joy of Generosity”	In preparation for Consecration Sunday, 10 minutes each day prayerfully considering how you will fill out your estimate of giving card for Sunday. Ask yourself, does this estimate adequately represent how much our church means to me? Also, spend some time thinking of a time when you experienced great joy, after having made a generous financial gift to some person or organization. Try to remember the joy of giving a gift and then witnessing the transformation that occurred. Consider writing down this remembrance.

Pre-Launch Resources

Check-List (Not all of these may apply to every pastoral context and they are not necessarily comprehensive)

- _____ Recruited 1-2 speakers for each of the worship services
- _____ Recruited volunteer individuals/groups to decorate the Altar
- _____ Recruited volunteers to post gratitude cards on the “Gratitude Wall”
- _____ Video recorded members, sharing what aspects of nature they appreciate
- _____ If your church uses social media, have you used those resources to introduce the series

Letters

Clayton Smith asserts in his book, *Propel*, that when promoting an annual giving campaign, it is best to “segment” your congregation into different giving levels so that people with different giving records receive communications that are uniquely tailored to them. In other words, the person who just puts \$5 in the plate each month receives different communication from the person who has a 20-year history of tithing. Smith writes: “Each level receives a different letter or e-mail to inform, inspire, and invite. We want every member to grow in their giving potential.”¹

While this may be an insightful strategy, it dramatically increases your work-load as a pastor in a typical appointment. It just may not be feasible in your context. However, you probably could segment along some broad lines. In my previous appointment, as a start toward multi-level communications, we segmented the congregation into two groups: (1) Those who filled out a pledge card and (2) Those who refused to complete a pledge card. These two letters are written generically with that segmentation in mind.

¹ Clayton Smith, *Propel, Good Stewardship, Greater Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 80.

Letter to People Who Previously Submitted Pledge Cards:



Your church letterhead

Gratitude...Prayer...Re-commitment

[Date]

Dear Friends,

Sunday, [fill in the date for Consecration Sunday], is very important in the life of our church. During our worship service(s) we will celebrate Consecration Sunday. At the conclusion of the service we will be given an opportunity to complete an *estimate of giving card for 2024* and then come forward to place the card on the Altar, as an offering to God. An estimate of giving card is included with this letter.

Over the years, our church has been very blessed to have the financial support of people like you. You and many others have consistently pledged to the church and then paid those pledges in full over the course of the next year. You have provided a solid financial foundation for our church. In your generosity, you have also provided crucial financial leadership for our congregation. **So, I want to extend my deepest, most heartfelt appreciation for your generosity and loyalty to our church.**

As you may already know, we will embark upon a four-week period of reflection and discernment, as part of our stewardship campaign this year. One important part of this process is simply remembering and being grateful for all that we have in life. Another important part of this process is remembering and being grateful for God's love—and, all that our church means to us.

As you think about your estimate of giving for 2024, I **encourage** you to reflect on God's love for each of us and for all that we have and for all that this church means to you. Ask yourself, does my estimate of giving truly reflect how much I feel blessed by God? Does my estimate reflect how much [name] United Methodist Church means to me?

Your financial support funds ministries that are truly transformational in the lives of so many people. At the same time, giving with an open and generous heart can be transformational for us as well. There is a deep joy in giving because through our financial support we help transform lives.

Let me conclude on a personal note, by just saying how grateful and excited I am to be pastor of [Name] United Methodist Church. I feel so fortunate to serve as pastor, and I am so excited about the potential and possibilities that we have for our future!

Yours in Christ's Service,

Letter to People Who Have Not Previously Submitted Pledge Cards:



Your church letterhead

Gratitude...Prayer...Re-commitment

[Date]

Dear Friends,

Sunday, [fill in the date for Consecration Sunday], is very important in the life of our church. During our worship service(s) we will celebrate Consecration Sunday. At the conclusion of the service we will be given an opportunity to complete an *estimate of giving card for 2024* and then come forward to place the card on the Altar, as an offering to God.

This fall stewardship process is vital for the future of our church. In order to be financially responsible our Finance Committee/Administrative Council/etc [fill in the appropriate administrative body] needs to know what our expected offerings will be next year, in order to develop a responsible and balanced budget. If in the past you have not completed an estimate of giving card, I urge you to re-consider for this year. An estimate of giving card is simply that, an estimate. You are free to adjust your giving at any point next year for whatever reason.

As you may already know, we will embark upon a four-week period of reflection and discernment, as part of our stewardship campaign. One important part of this process is simply remembering and being grateful for all that we have in life. Another important part of this process is remembering and being grateful for God's love—and, all that our church means to us.

Rather than completing your estimate of giving card based upon feelings of duty or obligation, I **encourage** you to make your estimate based upon a sense of gratitude for God's love, for all that you have and for all that this church means to you. Ask yourself, does my estimate of giving truly reflect how much I feel blessed by God? Does my estimate reflect how much [name] United Methodist Church means to me?

Your financial support funds ministries that are truly transformational in the lives of so many people. At the same time, giving with an open and generous heart can be transformational for us as well. There is a deep joy in giving because through our financial support we help transform lives.

Let me conclude on a personal note, by just saying how grateful and excited I am to be pastor of [Name] United Methodist Church. I feel so fortunate to serve as pastor, and I am so excited about the potential and possibilities that we have for our future!

Yours in Christ's Service,

Pledge Card (Feel free to modify wording or the font size)



(Name) United Methodist Church
Estimate of Giving Card for 2024

I/We want to support the work of (Name) UMC
 (This estimate may be revised or cancelled at any time by my/our request.)

\$ _____ Weekly \$ _____ Monthly \$ _____ Annually

Choose the time increment that is most convenient for you.

Please provide an estimate of your financial support, based upon weekly, monthly, or annually.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Thank you for Your Financial Support of our Church's Ministries

(This estimate may be revised or cancelled at any time by my/our request.)

God calls us to support the Church with our talents and service, as well as our financial gifts.

On the reverse side, feel free to list areas where you could volunteer your time and service.

Please check if you would like more information:

_____ **Please provide information for converting my giving to an online/automatic gift.**

_____ **Please provide information on Legacy Giving to support the future of [name] UMC**

Sample Newsletter Article on Next Page

“Gratitude...Prayer...Re-commitment”

It all begins with gratitude.

Eric Barker, in a blog several years ago, observes that the key to happiness is gratitude. He notes that in study after study after study, one of the most effective techniques for increasing long term happiness is to simply take 10 minutes each day to write down three things for which we are grateful.ⁱ Similarly, the U.S. Army has been testing an experimental program to build mental toughness in soldiers. In this resilience-building program, one of the three areas of emphasis is strengthening the soldiers’ sense of gratitude for the blessings in their lives.ⁱⁱ

For followers of Jesus Christ, gratitude is an important first step in our journey of faith. It is important to give God thanks for all of the blessings we have already received—and to acknowledge that ultimately we are dependent upon God. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (I Thessalonians 5:16-18) **Yes, it all begins with gratitude.**

Yet, as Christians, we are not always grateful. When we lose our sense of gratitude, then we begin to take things for granted—and we also lose a source for true joy in our lives.

Over the next four weeks, I invite you to enter with me into a process of **gratitude, prayer, and re-commitment**. This process will culminate with Consecration Sunday on Sunday, (insert date). On that day we will re-commit ourselves to supporting (Name) United Methodist Church. At the conclusion of the service we will be given an opportunity to complete an *estimate of giving card for 2024* and then come forward to place the card on the Altar, as an offering to God.

Financial estimate of giving cards are an important tool for our **Finance Committee** as it seeks to plan and budget wisely for our future. I am so grateful for everyone’s financial support of our community of faith in the past. As we look ahead, the Finance Committee and I want to continue using your financial offerings wisely to make a real difference in the world. Having financial estimate of giving cards immensely helps the Finance Committee in its budgetary planning for next year. Everyone should receive an estimate of giving card in the mail, soon.

As your pastor, let me be the first to share my gratitude for each of you and for our community of faith. I appreciate your support for this church—and for me, as your senior pastor. It has been an honor and a blessing to serve as pastor, and I look forward with great expectation to many years of joyful pastoral service. Thank you.

ⁱ See <http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2012/05/the-most-proven-technique-for-increasing-long/>, accessed 28 October 2014.

ⁱⁱ Ann Murphy Paul, “Can You Instill Mental Toughness?” *Time* magazine, 19 April 2012, accessed online at <http://ideas.time.com/2012/04/19/can-you-instill-mental-toughness/>, 28 October 2014.