A woman in Cincinnati told about the day two young boys from the inner city came to her suburban neighborhood selling Christmas cards. She invited the boys inside to get warm and served them cookies and hot chocolate. As they gobbled the cookies and sipped from the cups, they looked around in amazement at her home. One of them blurted out the way children do, “Lady, are you rich?”

She thought to herself, “Rich? Just last night my husband and I were talking about all the bills we can’t pay, and these kids think we’re rich.” But before she could reply the other one said, “Ma’am, we know you’re rich, because your cups and saucers match.”

It’s easy to lose perspective, isn’t it? Not only is it easy to forget that we are among the wealthiest in the world, but it’s easy to overlook our many blessings and focus instead on what we lack.

A couple of days ago, all of the retailers seized the remote control and switched the channel on us from Thanksgiving to shopping for Christmas. This morning I want to flick off the blare of the advertisers so that we can linger a bit longer in the spirit of Thanksgiving. I want us to think about the enormous difference in the quality of our lives if we possess a grateful heart.

In her latest book, Help. Thanks. Wow. Anne Lamott says that for her, gratitude is often “a rush of relief that she dodged a bullet – the highway patrol guy didn’t notice her speed by, or the dog didn’t get hit by someone else speeding by. Or thankyouthankyouthankyou that it was all a dream, my child didn’t drown.”

A feeling of sweat-wiping relief that we’ve been spared disaster can create a heart so grateful that we cannot find words big enough to express our ecstasy. “My wife is going to live. Or, we get to stay in our house…Things could have gone either way, but they came down on our side. It could have been much, much worse, and it wasn’t. Heads, we won.”

Ask someone who has had a brush with death, ask someone whose marriage came back from the brink, ask someone who has gotten a job after months of unemployment, ask someone who has recovered from an addiction how good life really is, and they can tell you a few things about gratitude.

This morning’s passage comes from the Apostle Paul’s letter to a Christian community mid-point in the first century. He did not realize he was also writing to Westminster.
Paul is focused on the transformation that occurs in people who follow Jesus. Our lives take on a dynamic quality. This new life does not happen automatically if we believe the right things about Jesus, but emerges over time as we choose to live in Christ-like ways.

In the verses that precede today’s passage, Paul says we must put to death those things that will devour our souls. He names greed, malice and evil desires among others. Then, he says, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another…and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you.”

Then, in three sentences Paul mentions the importance of gratitude three times. First, he says simply, “Be thankful.” Next, he says, “With gratitude in your hearts, sing songs to God.” Finally, he says, “Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.”

Such an emphasis on gratitude highlights its importance. Developing a grateful heart makes life happier, keeps the bad times in perspective, relieves the anxiety of thinking that the world will fall apart if we take our hands off the steering wheel and celebrates the fact that each day is a precious gift.

Some have difficulty seeing why they should be grateful. They don’t think of themselves as benefiting from the actions of others, but rather accomplishing all they have on their own.

If you think you’re who you are today simply as a result of your strong work ethic and your brilliant decisions, and you don’t see that you’ve received a great deal of help along the way from parents and teachers and coaches and doctors and did I mention God? If you don’t think you also got a boost from living in the right neighborhood and going to the right school and having friends at various ages who helped you out of a jam or kept you from totally screwing up; if you think you’ve accomplished everything on your own without any help from others and without some awfully good fortune, then there is exactly zero possibility that you will experience the gift of a grateful heart.

Henry Ward Beecher, one of the famous preachers of the 1800s, had a keen insight into gratitude. He pointed to the impossibility of knowing the internal peace generated by gratitude if you do not have some degree of humility. He said, “A humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grows.” A person who is full of himself is seldom grateful, because “he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.” Such a person is unable to discern the blessings of his life. On the other hand, the person with a thankful heart “sweeps up moments of thankfulness throughout her day like a magnet sweeping up iron filings.”

In the cynical times in which we live, people are quick to question the motives of others. Rather than simply being grateful for someone’s act of kindness, many will automatically doubt the sincerity of another and dig for a more calculating explanation for a charitable act. They ask themselves, “What’s in it for them?” assuming there must be an ulterior motive.

They imagine themselves to be bit wiser and less gullible than others. They pride themselves on seeing through what they imagine to be the benevolent veneer of others. However, always questioning the sincerity of others and constantly assuming that acts of kindness are rooted in selfishness, says a good deal more about the goodwill of the skeptic than it says about the person performing the act of kindness. If someone does something nice to you, just be grateful. Gratitude has the power to convert a “Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” into a “Terrific, Wonderful, Rewarding, Very Good Day.”

You may think of yourself as an old dog that cannot learn new tricks, but you can train yourself to become more grateful. One easy way to do this, is each evening, spend a few moments reflecting on your day and name three
things for which you’re thankful. Maybe it was the friend who called or a pick-me-up email. Perhaps it was a good night of sleep. A delicious lunch. The beautiful sunset. Or, begin each day with a prayer and then write down five things for which you are grateful. Your spouse, partner, child or friend. Your health that allows you to exercise and to go places. Your warm house on cold nights. Clean water. Blue skies. Our church where you can worship, build close ties with people who care, discover answers to big questions and find hope.

Each day, write down five different things for which you are grateful and say thank you to God for each of these gifts. It won’t take long for you to become more in tune with the blessings that dot your days, and such awareness can renew and refresh your spirit.

This fall we have been looking at the essential ingredients of a Christ-like life. Gratitude is indispensable because a grateful heart naturally prompts us to love others and ourselves, to be empathetic and to find meaning in service, to care about justice and to become more generous.

Michael Jinkins, the President of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary attended a luncheon to honor Ed Vickery, an attorney who was known for his generous spirit. Ed’s daughter told those gathered a story that typified her father and had actually happened that morning on their way to the luncheon.

“Having forgotten to check how much gas they had in the tank before leaving Houston, they ran out on a lonely stretch of road halfway to their destination. A phone call later, a young man from a gas station in the next town arrived. He put enough gas in the tank to get them to his station, where he filled up the car and they were ready to resume their trip. After the bill was settled, Ed handed his daughter two fifty-dollar bills to give to the young man as a way of saying ‘Thanks for coming to our rescue.’ She said, ‘Daddy, I’m sure he would be more than happy with just one of those.’ To which Ed responded, ‘I don’t want him to be happy. I want him to be ecstatic!’”

Jinkins reminds us that “Generosity is one of the consequences of gratitude. Whether we are expressing our gratitude toward someone who has helped us out of a jam, or whether we are helping someone in desperate need; whether we are extending care to an individual we know, or developing systems of economic support to make the world more just; whenever we act generously, in big ways and small, we are reflecting our gratitude to God.”

Thirteenth Century theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘Thank you,’ that will be enough.”

Before you leave the sanctuary this morning, jot down at least a couple of things for which you are thankful. Sometime later today, share them with someone else. Then, before you fall asleep tonight, simply say ‘Thank you’ to God. It could be a decisive step in your spiritual life.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 47.