

“Sow Big”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Sermon Series: Deeper Week 5. Give Thanks

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoggund

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That is how you say “Hello” in Armenian. As you may know, Lisa and I just completed an eleven day mission tour of the Republic of Armenia – my ancestral homeland. Whenever we travel to a foreign country, we like to learn a few phrases in the local language. For example here are some helpful phrases:

Ինչպե՞ս եք - How are you?

Ինչպե՞ս ս է ձեր անունը - What is your name?

Դուք անգլերեն գիտե՞ք - Do you know English?

Այստեղ ինչ-որ մեկն անգլերեն գիտի՞ - Is there anyone here who speaks English?

Որտե՞ղ է գուգարանը - Where is the toilet?

Ես ուսում եմ միայն կոշեր ուսելիք – No, I don’t know Kim Kardashian

It turns out one of the most difficult words to master in Armenian is:

Շնորհակալություն (shnora-ka-loo-TYOON). It means “Thank you.” It’s so hard to say that the majority of Armenians simply say, “Merci.”

In case you know nothing about Armenia – which is probably all of you – here are a few notes on the history of my people. We are one of the oldest surviving nations in the world. Perched on the edge of Mount Ararat where Noah landed the Ark, Armenia contains the oldest wine making facility and the oldest laced leather shoe from 6,000 years ago. Of all the countries mentioned on the world’s oldest map (6th century BC), Armenia is the only one still around. While we were there, the capital city of Yerevan celebrated its 2,799 birthday making it older than Rome. One hundred years before Jesus’ birth, the Kingdom of Armenia stretched from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean.

Yet despite all these glories, Armenia has suffered greatly. Like Israel, it sits at the crossroads of continents. Waves of Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Ottoman Turks and Russians have invaded, clashed and conquered it. Like the Jews, the Armenians have nearly always been surrounded by nations with different faiths. Like the Jews, the Armenians suffered an unspeakable genocide in the 19th and 20th centuries which slaughtered 1.5 million innocent victims. And like the Jews, Armenians, such as my family, have been scattered in a diaspora around the world.

Following the genocide, Armenia was oppressed for seventy years under the rule of the USSR. Then, in 1988, a devastating earthquake injured 130,000 and killed up to 50,000. Today, the country of Armenia is one tenth of the empire it once was. Being land locked and surround on almost every side by hostile neighbors, the Republic of Armenia is struggling to recover. Farms, factories and industries collapsed when the Russians pulled out in 1991. There is a long-standing state of cold war with neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan. It's a largely rocky and mountainous country. From its few fertile valleys the people attempt to grow enough to feed themselves and trade with others. From all this, you might conclude the Armenians have little reason to say, "Thank you."

And yet they do. What makes them most grateful is their faith. In the year AD 301, King Trdat III declared Christianity the religion of his realm making Armenia the first Christian nation in history – even before the Roman Empire. It has been that way ever since. Everywhere you look in this country, the cross of Jesus is lifted high. In the face of earthquake, famine, poverty, invasion, oppression, and massive genocide, the Armenians cling to Jesus Christ. They can say with the Apostle Paul, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift." (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Gratitude. It's the next step on our journey to go Deeper. When we let go of the dock to follow Jesus, cleanse our hearts of false idols, get into God's rhythm of work and rest, and open up to hear His voice in prayer, what unfolds is a heart full of gratitude. Many ask me, "What is God's will for me?" With simple straightforward words, here's what the Apostle Paul says,

Be joyful always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (I Thessalonians 5:16-18)

So an attitude of gratitude is essential for a Deeper relationship with Jesus.

What attitude do you find when you look inside your heart? Too often it's something besides gratitude. There may be an **Attitude of Indulgence**. Certainly commercials stoke this craving. Just ask the eight-year-old Ohio boy who desperately wanted a McDonald's cheeseburger. Despite eating a full dinner, he couldn't get it out of his head. So after his parents went to bed he watched some YouTube videos on how to drive a car, convinced his four-year-old sister to get in the family van, and drove one and a half miles to the local Mickey D's for a fix. When the van reached the drive-in window the employees thought it was a prank. Then they called the police. That's when the boy finally burst into tears. But, in the end, while waiting to be picked up, they got their

cheeseburgers.¹ Indulgence tells us to feed ourselves no matter what it takes or what it costs. An attitude of indulgence is never satisfied.

You might be gripped by an **Attitude of Fear**. We dread losing a person, place or thing we have. We worry about not getting a person, place or thing we want. The Unisys Security index measures anxiety about issues like national security, disasters or epidemics, and personal safety. The 2017 survey reveals anxiety levels in the U.S. jumped sharply since the last survey in 2014, and came in at the highest levels since the surveys began a decade ago.

"It's an understatement to say that anxiety level is high, and we live in very uncertain times," said a Unisys senior vice president. "We definitely have seen a huge spike over the last three years." Another expert added, "It appears the impression that we are more secure than the rest of the world is starting to fade."²

Do worry, anxiety and fear fill your heart?

Or your heart may be swamped with an **Attitude of Self-Pity**. You rehearse in your head the things that went wrong this week. You feel unappreciated, ignored, overlooked. You focus on the hardships you've endured. You list all the ways you're right and someone else is wrong. You wallow in a pity-party for one. Indulgence, fear and self-pity – some of the worst forms of heart disease. All three focus on me. Indulgence cries, "Please me." Fear cries, "Protect me." Self-pity cries, "Woe is me."

An Attitude of Gratitude goes in the opposite direction. When indulgence takes, gratitude gives. When fear shakes, gratitude serves. When self-pity sulks, gratitude thanks. The Christians in Corinth were afflicted with indulgence, fear and self-pity. Corinth was a rich city. It was a crucial stop on the main trade route so goods from all over the empire passed through it. This made it a wild and indulgent city and a crime-ridden fearful city. The newborn Christians in the Corinthian church occasionally indulged in worldly pleasures, were fearful of being persecuted, and whined about the way Paul, the founder of the church, treated them. At one point they promised to give an offering of their resources to the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. But the gift never appeared. Paul writes,

Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. (2 Corinthians 8:10-11)

What happened? Maybe they decided they wanted to indulge themselves by buying a new chariot or the latest Armenian leather shoes. Maybe they feared they wouldn't have enough money for the coming winter. Maybe they whined it was unfair to expect them to support Christians in Judea. Whatever the reason, they didn't fulfill their pledge.

¹ David Moye, "8-Year-Old 'Borrows' Dad's Car, Drive to McDonald's For Cheeseburger," The Huffington Post (4-13-17)

² Tim Johnson, "Pass The Valium: U.S. Anxiety Levels Climb Faster Than Rest of The World," Miami Herald (6-20-17)

So Paul decides to use this offering to cultivate an attitude of gratitude in the Corinthians.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. (2 Corinthians 9:6)

It's a simple principle: sow a small amount of seed – see a small harvest. Sow big, see a big harvest. Is Paul saying, "Give a big tithe and you'll get rich"? Never! The big harvest is helping the lost and least, the poor and the powerless. That's exactly what Paul writes in the next verses:

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." (2 Corinthians 9:8-9)

You and I are a pipeline of God's blessings. Sure – some of them are for us to use. But if they stop with us, if only a trickle of blessings leak through, then we are missing the point of why we are here. God blesses us to be a blessing. God gives us the seed to sow a big harvest of help to the poor and hungry, the oppressed and persecuted, the lost and least.

You and I have to sow big. Remember a few months ago when I mentioned my terrible lawn and how all my neighbors were cheating by using a guy named Bill to treat their lawns? Well one of my neighbors told on me. The next time I saw Bill he said, "I know who you are and I know where you work." "Really?" "Yeah. I listened to the sermon online." "Curses!" "That just happened to be my birthday. Thanks." "Well Bill," I asked, "What do I need to do about this lawn?" "Power seed!" In other words: to bring my lawn back to life I have to sow big. That's what he did while I was gone. This week he sent me a text which said, "Now you're cheating."

One of the best ways to cultivate an attitude of gratitude is to sow big by giving our financial gifts and our spiritual gifts. Paul says the place to start is not in your bank account, paycheck or stock portfolio but in your heart.

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

There are two ways not to give: reluctantly or under compulsion. Why do some Christians feel this way when they give? It may their hearts are filled with attitudes of indulgence, fear and self-pity. Indulgence says, "I need the iPhone 8." Fear says, "I may not have enough money if the economy falls." Self-pity says, "Why is everyone always bugging me for money?" Paul says, "Don't be a reluctant giver or a compelled giver. Be a cheerful, grateful giver." Gratitude breaks all those attitudes. This week – try this: Make a gratitude list. Write down all the blessings in your life, all the things which make you smile, all the resources which make life possible, all the rights which make you free, all the relationships which make your life full, everything you can think of that causes you to say thanks. Write them down. Look at them. Think about them. I bet when you see in

black and white how blessed your life is it will change your attitude and outlook on life. You won't need to indulge yourself because you have so much. You won't need to fear because you know God will provide for you in the future as He has in the past. You won't need to wallow in self-pity because there is so much good in your life.

Once the attitude of gratitude grows in you, you can't help but bless others. Paul says, "Corinthians, God has mightily blessed you – you need to sow big and bless others." That's what one of the lessons I learned in Armenia. I heard stories of how people were orphaned, wounded and killed by earthquakes. That's never happened to me. I learned there were times they had no food, heat, electricity or water. I've never known such circumstances. I discovered they had to baptize their babies in secret and renounce Christ if they hoped to have a job in the Communist Government. I've never faced such opposition. I witnessed pictures of thousands who were slaughtered in the most unspeakable ways because of their faith in Jesus and their Armenian heritage. I have never tasted such terror. And even today, I met mission workers who labor to provide food, medicines, healthcare, housing and escape for people during the Lebanese Civil War and currently during the Syrian Civil War. They serve with bombs dropping all around them. I have never lived in a war zone. And the Armenians are not the only ones who are suffering. It's happening on every continent around this globe.

And I sit back and say to myself, "What right do I have to be indulgent? What right do I have to fear? What right do I have to feel sorry for myself?" With all the blessings God has given me, I should be the most grateful person on the planet every day of my life. With all the blessings God has given me, I need to be doing everything I can to sow big and bless others.

Take a moment this week and make a gratitude list. Then take this card, pray and ask God to fill you with an attitude of gratitude so you can sow big.

Let me tell you about a man whose heart held no gratitude. His name is Vartan Jinishian. He was born in 1870 in Marash, Turkey. Though he was the son of an Armenian Protestant Minister, he seemed little interested in church. As a young man, Vartan came to America to work in the Armenian Carpet business. He became extremely successful, amassed a large fortune, purchased apartments in Manhattan, a home in the suburbs, another in Atlantic City and a place in Paris. Vartan filled all his homes with antiques and expensive carpets. He gained a reputation for being a hard-boiled stingy, penny-pinching businessman. As his wealth grew he distanced himself from the Armenian community. Vartan was annoyed at always being solicited to give to the poor and needy Armenians. If someone came to ask for a donation he would keep them waiting for days until they went away. He closed his ears to their cries. Acquaintances described him as cynical, stubborn and suspicious of people. Then he retired and, ever so cautiously, Vartan began to give anonymously to the desperate people in Syria.

While Jinishian was in the nursing home, an inner voice spoke to him about those who needed his help. He had a change of heart, an 11th-hour turnaround, and began to prepare his will to help the desperately poor, the least of these, his Armenian brothers and sisters around the world.

In 1966, Vartan Jinishian died leaving nearly all his vast estate to the Presbyterian Church to start a fund to aid his struggling Armenian brothers and sisters. Our trip last week celebrated the 50th Anniversary of his late yet generous gift. He ultimately sowed big and we have seen the vast fruit of his labor. Over the last five decades refugees find shelter, orphans receive care, farmers expand their harvests, children receive an education, villages are developed, hospitals are opened, homes are built, faith grows and hope is reborn. All because one stingy man had a change of heart.

Don't wait till you die. Know the joy of giving while you're living.

Go out and sow big!

II Corinthians 9:6-15

6 Remember this:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give,

not reluctantly
or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver.

8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you,

so that in all things
at all times,
having all that you need,
you will abound in every good work.

9 As it is written:

“He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower

and bread for food
will also supply and increase your store of seed
and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

11 You will be made rich in every way

so that you can be generous on every occasion,
and through us your generosity will result
in thanksgiving to God.

12 This service that you perform

is not only supplying the needs of God's people

but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

13 Because of the service

by which you have proved yourselves,

men will praise God

for the obedience that accompanies your confession

of the gospel of Christ,

and for your generosity

in sharing with them and with everyone else.

14 And in their prayers for you

their hearts will go out to you,

because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!