

Making the "Glad Game" Part of Life

Thanksgiving Sunday, 2012

Preacher: Dr. Donald W. Haynes

Scripture: Psalm 100

Kallam Grove Christian Pulpit

My childhood home was very modest, and we had very few books, but we had lots of love and, from my mother, a steady stream of philosophy! When she began a sentence, "Son," I knew a lesson was coming! She often quoted to me a little poetic couplet: **"Two men looked out from behind the bars and one saw mud and one saw stars."** I developed a mental image of that little rhyme and could see those two jailbirds faces pushed against iron bars with one looking down into the muck and mire to which he would likely return, and the other looking up to the starry heavens and the dream of starting a new life when he got out of prison. The lesson was obvious-- **life is not determined by our circumstances, but by our attitude.** With those words and a hundred other wisdom sayings, Mama taught me to look beyond our family circumstances and to dream dreams and see visions.

Pollyanna

Have you ever heard of a children's book entitled *Pollyanna*? It is the name of a novel written in 1913 by Eleanor Porter of Littleton, New Hampshire. In the town of Littleton, New Hampshire, there is a bronze statue of a young girl with both hands lifted high in the air like butterfly wings. Pollyanna is a little orphaned girl who was sent by the court to live with her wealthy but mean and crotchety aunt. However, you see, Pollyanna had a sunny personality. Her room was a dusty, hot attic, even though her aunt had a large and lovely mansion. But Pollyanna told Aunt Polly that she loved her room because out of her window she could see the White Mountains of New Hampshire! One year for Christmas Pollyanna had asked Santa Claus for a doll but as a cruel joke, she got a pair of crutches. Instead of crying, she smiled and said, **"Well, Aunt Polly, I am glad I don't have to use them because I can walk."** And so it was that Pollyanna in chapter after chapter and hardship after hardship invariably interpreted life by what she called the "Glad Game."

Across the years, people have mocked Pollyanna. If you have a "Pollyanna" view of a business going south, or your sickness, your sadness, or any difficult time of life, you are seen to be naïve, in denial, out of touch with reality. To be called a "Pollyanna" is not a compliment, but mockery. A Pollyanna does not understand the gravity of a situation. A Pollyanna is annoying to a person who sees the downside of everything and every day:

- Why smile when you can frown?
- Why laugh when you can growl?
- Why be glad when you can choose to be mad?
- Why be thankful when you can gripe about what you don't have or what is bothering you?
- Why love someone when you can despise them?
- Why be a friend when you can criticize them behind their back?

The Book: *A Simple Act of Gratitude*

Two weeks ago I was sort of down myself. I was worried and disturbed at some things going on with people who are important to me. I picked up a magazine whose cover story was "practicing gratitude." I turned to the article. **A pastor in Oklahoma City challenged his church members to practice a year of gratitude.** I found in the article the pastor's reference to a book entitled, *A Simple Act of Gratitude, by John Kralik--how learning to say 'thank you' changed my life.* I promptly ordered five copies from Amazon--one for each of our children, one for the church media center and one for Joan and me.

John Kralik--Down on his Luck

The book is a true story, indeed an autobiography by an attorney in Los Angeles. As John took stock of his life on December 22, 2007, it had been a miserable year.

- He was estranged from his two grown sons by his first marriage.
- His second marriage was locked in divorce court,
- He was paying mortgages on three houses--two occupied by his two former wives and one by his son.
- Meanwhile, he was living in a cheap apartment furnished with second hand stuff from Good Will.
- His law firm was losing money and he had given no Christmas bonuses to his employees.
- His savings were exhausted.
- He had suffered since childhood with asthma and could not afford a doctor's care; so his wheezing was worse these days

One of the only two bright spots in his life was a woman named Grace. When he delivered a Christmas present to her door, she said, "I don't want a Christmas present from you" and slammed the door. The other bright spot was his seven year old daughter by his second marriage. However, he was afraid of losing her since she had to sleep on an air mattress on the floor under the window air conditioner in his one bedroom apartment.

On the day of the Rose Bowl parade, John climbed a high hill overlooking the ocean and sat on the foundation of a burned hotel. As he heard the trombones and French Horns celebrating from the parade route, the only inner voice he could hear in his mind was "loser." **Fifty-two years old, two failed marriages, a failing law firm, a failed romance with Grace, estrangement from his two sons.** He was about to be kicked out of his law office and had not even paid for the new stationery his paralegal bought, which would likely have the wrong address before he had money to pay for the stationery. He thought about Ernest Hemingway who had taken his own life.

His Decision to Be Thankful

As John sat there, a strong thought came to him that was like a voice. He was not a religious man so at that point in his life, he did not give God any credit. It seemed to say, **"the key to happiness is not getting what you want, but being thankful for what you have."** Sitting there on the remains of that hotel on what was ironically called "Echo Mountain," John made a ridiculous decision.

He decided, though he had terrible handwriting, **that he would write a thank you note to someone for something every day for the next 365 days. It was December 22, 2007.**

BUT, John had a problem. As he walked down the mountain with his new resolution, he could not think of anything to thank anybody for. It was Christmas, but he would not receive many presents and would not like the ones he would get. Considering how "down" he was, for what and to whom was he thankful for anything? As he walked, he pressed on with his year of gratitude. He developed a strange list for his thank you notes:

- a note for anything given to him
- a meal when someone picked up the tab
- a compliment
- an employee who did anything right or on time
- a bill that was paid
- a new client
- someone he had not seen since college
- someone from whom he had parted ways
- an opposing attorney in a trial
- a judge who had ruled against him
- even old Robert, the building superintendent of the building where his ratty apartment was, and where:
 - the commode surged about every five minutes all night,
 - the window air conditioning unit moaned and groaned 24/7 and never got his apartment below 88 degrees in the southern California summer
 - the old steam radiators that clanged all night and never got his apartment above the outside temperature in winter.

With that he began 2008.

The Year was 2008!!!!

Now if you remember the year following John's decision to be grateful, **2008 was a terrible year.** The stock market tanked, the largest banks in America went broke. On March 18, Bear Stearns collapsed. Lehman Brothers went "belly up." Millions of Americans defaulted on the mortgages they could not afford when the bank gave them money without credit or down payment. His clients could not pay their bills so he could not pay his bills so his employees could not pay their bills. Grace still would not return his phone calls.

But John kept churning out daily thank you notes. He even sent one to each of his ex-wives, thanking each of them for being a good mother in spite of the fact their marriage did not make it. He found an old envelope he had never opened that was from his first wife. Upon receipt many years ago, knowing it was from her, he never opened it assuming she would be blessing him out. In 2008, **he opened it. It was one line. It read, "John, let me love you."** Now he wrote a much belated note, thanking her for those words even though she had long ago gone on with her life in another direction.

As a freshman at Michigan State years before, John had gotten so drunk one night that he went to sleep in the snow in his underwear and would have frozen to death except for a guy

named "Neil" in the dorm. He contacted the alumni office at Michigan State, got Neil's address, and wrote him a thank you note for saving his life when he was eighteen and drinking like a fish.

John had ended a lot of relationships in his life. If anyone did anything he did not like, his attitude was, "I can get along in my life without you." **As a result, his life was littered with ex friends, family members whom he had not seen in decades, business associates with whom he no longer did business.** He realized there was one common denominator in all the failed relationships. **Himself.** He had never been a grateful person; he had been a critical person, a complainer. So, he had a lot of "thank-you" notes to write--with apologies.

By June he had written 168 thank you notes.

Then in October 2008 the stock market bombed. From 14,000 the Dow went through 12,000 but no one thought it could go below 10,000 but it did. It got lower than in 2001 after the destruction of the World Trade towers--below 9000. The financial disaster was unreal like a movie or a bad dream. With each bank failure, fewer of his clients paid him for his services. He continued to persevere and kept writing "thank you" notes. He kept accentuating the positive and looking for something in every situation for which to be thankful. (Martin Luther once said that we should be "little Christs" to each other.

Practicing Pollyanna's "Glad Game"

John's "little Christ" was his daughter. His precious little girl had asked him to pull out his old sofa from the wall so that she could make a playhouse. She told him how she loved his terrible apartment and how she loved being with her daddy. She reminded him of a book from his childhood that he had long ago forgotten. And so it was that he began to read her one chapter a night from the book, *Pollyanna*. **He and his little seven year old daughter began to play in his dilapidated apartment the same game that the fictional Pollyanna played in the attic of her mean old aunt--the "Glad game."** In every situation and circumstance, they found something to be glad about. He discovered that the story of Pollyanna was totally different from the way he had used the word since his days in law school. **It was not naïve; it was an alternative attitude.**

One night while walking by a church, his foot hit a root protruding from the sidewalk, and he fell sprawling to the concrete. It knocked the breath out of him. **And when he regained his breath, the first thing he saw were the three crosses on the lawn of the church.** He had long ago been taken to church as a child and been confirmed but all his adult life he was an agnostic. **That night he prayed for the first time in over forty years.**

The Effect of the Book on My life--Remembering my 7th grade teacher!

One of the least effective teachers I ever had in school was in the seventh grade. It was the year my daddy died in September; the week school started.

I remember no math, no history, no English, no geography. I could easily say it was a year wasted in my education of the academic curriculum. Honestly, she taught us only two things--the poems of Rudyard Kipling and the Psalms of the Holy Bible! You see, she did something every week that no teacher can do today. Every Monday on the back section of the long blackboard that ran down the side of the room, Miss Smith would write a psalm from the Bible. Every morning, we would read it as a class devotional. Any time I was bored or daydreaming, I

would work on committing that psalm to memory. Every Friday after you came back from PE and were winding down the school day and the school week, if you had learned the psalm during the week, she asked you to recite it to the class. I began to memorize a psalm every week! I developed more appreciation for the Bible from Rosa W. Smith than from Sunday School. She did not stay long at our school. **I never wrote to her to tell her how my life and my ministry have been blessed by her teaching me those psalms and Kipling.**

*One of the psalms is the basis for the vow I made with God last Sunday night about 1:00 a.m. when I finished reading the book, **A Simple Act of Gratitude**. It had been a long day, and I was really sleepy but I sent three email "thank you" notes--two of them to church members, people who had told people they were disappointed in me. I thanked them for what they mean to me and to this church. The next day, I wrote three more. And I took the pledge along with my wife, Joan, who took it with me. We committed to write a thank you note every day until Thanksgiving Day next year.*

I went this week and sat in my car outside the windows of Miss Smith's classroom. Assuming she has long since gone to heaven, I asked forgiveness for being so ungrateful for her all these years, and I quoted to her what I recited to the class on one of those Fridays in the 7th grade.

In the 9th grade my mother cooked for all the schoolteachers who lived in the county-owned "teacherage" next to the school building. One was a woman named "Dorothy Blackwell" who was teaching until she could get in medical school to become a doctor. She saw that I was something of a "loser" and began to take a lot of interest in encouraging me, building up my self-esteem that was so low. I pledged to write "Miss Blackwell" who for many years was a pediatrician in Raleigh.

I seldom prepare a sermon where something I am remembering or researching does not remind me of another teacher, Lucille Vaught. She taught me Civics, English, and American History! When I retired in 1999, I had her nephew bring her to Salisbury: First United Methodist Church so I could thank her in front of that great congregation.

You might say of this sermon that I did not preach the Bible. Maybe not, but one of the psalms I learned in the 7th grade, the year that Daddy died, was Psalm 100. It is the scripture on which I base today's sermon. Rather than preaching it to you, I vow that I want to live by the lesson of Psalm 100 in my remaining time. Will you join me in making this year a Year of Gratitude?

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth; worship the Lord with gladness
Come before his presence with singing.

**Know that the Lord he is God
It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves.**

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.
Enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise

**Give thanks to him and bless his name.
For the Lord is good and his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations."**

If you feel so led, reach out to someone today and thank them for something. Start every day with gratitude. Or just hug someone or squeeze their hand. Read or sing the hymn about thankfulness: "Come Ye Thankful People Come." Let us be grateful. Amen.