

**Thanksgiving Eve**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**November 24, 2021**

Why do we teach our children the importance of saying “please” and “thank you” from the time they’re three years old? “Please pass me the peanut butter” is a lot different than “give me the peanut butter.” When I say “please” and “thank you,” I’m acknowledging that you are a free person. It’s just that little signal from me that you have space to make your choice and do what you want. And “thank you for getting me the peanut butter” acknowledges, “you had a choice whether to do that for me...and you did it!” I’d actually go so far as to say, *please* and *thank you* open up these little spaces where love can happen. Love needs freedom...it needs space to be love. We know as believers that real love is not just a feeling...it’s a choice. And you can’t force someone to love you. Freedom is the necessary condition for love to be possible. “Thank you” is a way of saying, “you did not have to do that. You did have a choice. And you chose to love me. Thank you.”

What does it mean when people stop saying please and thank you? It means we're getting a little bit tyrannical with each other. We feel the world owes us something. It's a great description of sin. Sinful Seth will rarely admit that Seth owes the world something. I like to keep it so that I feel even with my parents, my spouse, my coworkers, my fellow church members. My sinful nature makes me incapable of admitting how dependent I am, on people and things that are outside myself. One of the first things sin kills is thanksgiving...my ability to be grateful.

It makes me forget that my existence is a miracle. How utterly impossible the odds are that I even came into existence, that I have consciousness. It is a miracle that we are here together in this room right now. But sin makes me miss that miracle. It shrinks my world down to a narrow little space where I'm constantly keeping score.

But then I listen to Jesus, and I hear the real score: God infinity, me nothing. It's all a free gift. And it's hard to hear that, because you know there's no way to pay him back. It's hard to say thank you, to admit that total dependence on God. If you're used to keeping score, faith is like dying. You gotta die to all that control you want over life. You gotta die the death of faith.

You know the book of psalms—how the book moves towards praise more and more until by the time you reach the last one, number 150—it's just an ecstatic expression of thanksgiving; all that has life and breath raising up a hymn of joy to the creator who loves us...the God whom we can amazingly call our own father.

That's a picture of heaven—you might say that's a picture of the goal towards which we're heading in the future. All the universe is going to end in praise and worship and thanksgiving towards God. But here's the million dollar question: is there any way to that right now? Is there any way to that joy and praise and thanksgiving—because isn't praise, worship and thanksgiving what we're born for? I want to have that now, don't you?

So how can I get joy? How can I get gratitude? Is this something I can work myself into?

When I was younger I used to think of faith in a very psychological way, like as long as I thought the right thoughts about God and Jesus and myself, I'd be able to escape the traps that the devil is setting for me—the traps that bogged me down in myself. I used to think as long as I thought right, I was going to be right. But I've learned that I can give five sermons on the importance of gratitude, and still experience no gratitude whatsoever towards God in my life.

You know what I've learned I need in order to experience joy, praise, and gratitude in my life—what God wants me to have? I need God's church. As in, I need God's people around me. I need this network of faith-centered relationships. I've always known that intellectually. But as I've gotten older I realize that gratitude grows out of humility. I need to receive God's grace into my life from people who give it to me. And I have to deal with the fact that I can't control those people. That's Church. It's humbling. I have to hear God's word about Jesus Christ coming to me from people who love me, and I just have to deal with the fact that that grace is really free, and true. I need the Word of God to break into my life over and over again, to shake me free of my need to control everything. And where does that word break in, if it's not through other Christians? Through my real life interactions with you all.

Do we realize how important it is to people's souls, what Christians are doing in their congregations...what we're doing here at St. John's? We're loving each other and hopefully strangers in our community with God's love. We're loving people where they're at. We're not trying to force people into a mold. We're giving each other forgiveness and room to grow, transformed by the word of God in Jesus Christ to be truly the person we were born to be: we were born to praise God from our hearts. We're here to set each other free with that word.

I want to give that beautiful news to other people and watch them bloom and grow in that freedom. And I need other people—I need God's church—to keep on reminding me of the real score when I forget it. In the gospel, Jesus heals the 10 lepers, and only one comes back to thank him. Jesus is shocked by that—where are the other nine, he asks. You know, it's not that Jesus needs us to thank him, like he depends on our gratitude.

Obviously Jesus does not *need* our gratitude like that. You know what he's feeling when those nine out of ten don't thank him—it's sadness. Not for himself, like they owe him gratitude—he doesn't need it. He's sad for *them*, because they're missing out on the biggest joy of all. The joy that comes not from the gift of healing, but from knowing the healer himself. He loves us. And since he loves us, he gives us our freedom to respond—or not respond—to him. He won't force anything on us. He'll always give us room to come to him of our own accord. He loves you and will always give you that free space to love him back. That's the risk God takes in making us what we are...free creatures. We can always walk away from him. And yes, that'll hurt him. We can reject him; we can even kill him. And he will take that. But since he is love in the flesh, and since he is free, he won't settle for anything less than freedom for those he loves.

Sometimes it seems like people are not saying please and thank you very much. And it's sad, because people are closing the doors on an amazing joy. We're less and less able to love, and we're giving people less space and freedom where they can give love. There's a whole lot of people out there living a pretty drab life. That's why the church has a big job in front of us.

We're here to reach out with that love in Jesus Christ, that love that sets people free—to be amazed at the grace and love and salvation of God, to be set free from the constant scorekeeping.

Isn't it amazing, through Jesus we can stand in front of God of this universe and say "please." We aren't going to be able to give him anything that he needs. But in Christ, we are given this amazing honor, of being able to ask him for everything we need. Without Jesus we'd be like moths burning up in a flame. But Jesus gives us his place with God, so we have this free space where we can know God and talk to him...this is a miracle. That we can come together right here in front of this holy God and know this amazing love at the center of our lives...this is a miracle. That he loves it when we make requests of him, is a miracle.

He wants us to bring everything in our lives to him. Please God, take my joys. Please, Father, take my sadness, my accomplishments, my worries, my pride, my gifts, take all my wealth, take all my heartbreaks. Please God, take my country. Take my town, my neighborhood. Please, take my spiritual blindness, take my sickness, and in the end, please, God...take my life, and take my death. That we can stand in front of him, and give it all to him, so that he can make it all holy—this is a miracle. And we put a please in front of all our requests, not because he needs us to be polite, but because we know our Father is completely free. He is not a tame God in any way. He is a consuming fire. I have no hold on him...only faith and trust.

And look how he responds. Torn apart for us on a cross. He gladly is broken for us. He gladly gives his whole kingdom to us. He gives us a place in his loving arms, where we can live and move and be free every day. There's only one response we can make to this amazing grace: **THANK YOU.**