



11.16.25 Grateful Together | Philippians 1:3–6

My mother's cancer came back with a vengeance when I was in college. She had just come home from one of her many surgeries, and this one hadn't gone well. They removed what they could of the tumors encircling her cervical spine, but something went wrong. Either she had a stroke under anesthesia, or the doctor nicked her spinal cord.

Because, when she came home, she was partially paralyzed on her left side — her arm and leg. Thankfully not her face or her ability to speak. But she had to use a walker and wear a brace on her leg for the last ten years of her life.

It changed everything. She struggled to walk, to care for herself, to live the life she once had and there was no cure. We knew the cancer would take her in the end.

At that time, I hadn't been attending church regularly. But when this crisis hit, the church went into action in so many beautiful ways. They prayed — and prayed — for my mom and for our family. And many times, I felt those prayers.

They brought meals. They sent cards. They called my mom and visited her personally. They brought her copies of Our Daily Bread — those little devotionals.

I came across them when sorting through my mom's things. You could tell she had read and re-read them, underlining favorite passages...in different ink colors, dog-eared pages that spoke to her heart. Those booklets helped her process her pain and discouragement and drew her closer to God.

I wasn't always thankful for the church's involvement during that time. My dad and brother were very against Christianity and the church. We were a closed-off family, living out in the country, not handling things well. It was hard to have strangers look into our lives.

But looking back now, I am deeply grateful. That church's love for God moved them to reach out. Simple companionship in a very rough patch of our lives. That church didn't just pray for us, or just feed us — they walked with us.

In her book *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass observes that gratitude is inherently social—it always involves connection. And Diana notes that gratitude rarely stands alone; it comes with prepositions.

We are grateful FOR something, grateful TO someone, and often grateful WITH others.

Even when we experience gratitude in solitude, it still connects us beyond ourselves.

Bass was at a friend's beach house during the quiet off-season, seeking peace during a time of personal grief and uncertainty. One morning, she was walking along the beach as the sun rose. In the sunrise, she noticed shimmering colors of blue, pink, and silver on the ocean waves, in awe-inspiring hues she had never seen before.

Then suddenly she experienced her heart opening up, gratitude welling up inside of her. She felt grateful for the beauty before her, grateful to her friend for the gift of rest, and grateful with the seabirds soaring overhead.

She was alone but she did not feel alone. In that moment, she felt gratitude created community within her soul— first a connection to nature's rhythms, then to the generosity of her friend, and then to the God who gives life! Another web of gratitude.

The sun and sea offered their gifts freely and obliviously. Yet, her response of thanks transformed the scene into a sacred exchange: gifts were given and received, praise rose heavenward, and her awareness of interconnectedness deepened.

Bass concludes that when it comes to gratitude, me always leads to we. Gratitude moves us outward, dissolving isolation and reminding us that life is sustained through a web of relationships— with human, with the holy, and with nature.

Philosopher Robert Emmons echoes this insight saying, “Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships...”

In essence, gratitude is not just an emotion; it is a spiritual practice of connection. Reminding us that every thankful heart participates in a larger story of grace and belonging.

As a church we understand this sense of connection gratitude creates amongst us, pulling us together and bonding us together in love. This is why we added a modified “Passing of the Peace” back into our service. It gives us an opportunity to celebrate being together, seeing each other, getting to know one another.

But it is not always easy to be together. It can be hard at times and it takes effort and work on our part to keep breaking down walls that keep us separated from one another.

Bass noted that in Western societies, more people than ever live alone. In some European and North American cities, the number of single person households are near 60%.

Although living solo is not necessarily a problem, as it points towards new patterns of potential community and the need to forge new connections. Many observers argue our societies are awash with a loneliness epidemic, making it increasingly difficult to address a variety of collective problems, from aging to economic inequality to climate change.

Has social isolation also created an erosion of public gratitude?

Although gratitude has had a bit of a revival in recent years, a longer view is helpful. Use of the words “gratitude” and “thanksgiving” reached a peak around 1820 and steadily declined to a low around the year 2000.

Language use reveals that we are not nearly as aware of gratitude as our ancestors were. Not to wax nostalgic about it, but most 19th century people lived in cultures with...love this descriptive phrase from Bass, “thicker social ties”.

And then around the year 2000, we started using the word gratitude again. Not nearly as much as in the past, but there was an uptick.

Are we reaching out to reclaim gratitude because we were reaching toward one another again? But where in the world, can we find each other in the midst of a lonely world? Is it possible to feel grateful together again?

When I think about gratitude that connects us, I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Philippians from chapter 1, verses 3 and 5:

"I thank my God every time I remember you... because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

Paul wrote this letter from prison as a way to connect with others, to strengthen his connection with the Philippians. His circumstances were bleak, yet his heart overflowed with gratitude for their love, prayers, and support in serving God.

We can see that what gave him joy was not his situation, but his connection to others. In his time of need, he reached out to them because of a deep, sustaining bond he shared with the believers in Phillipi.

Gratitude, for Paul, was not an emotion that depended on his comfort or success. For Paul, it was the recognition of a sacred partnership in God's ongoing work.

He looked back on their shared story – their generosity, their prayers, their steadfast faith – and he thanked God for them. Even in chains, he could say in verse four, "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy."

Why? Because gratitude reminded him that he was not alone. The same Spirit who lived in him, lived in them and connected them together. And together, they were part of something larger – the unfolding work of Christ in the world.

That's what gratitude does: it pulls us back into relationship, into remembrance, into joy. When we thank God for one another, when we are grateful together we are reminded that the Christian life is not a solo journey. It's a shared pilgrimage of grace.

When my mother was sick, I didn't see it then, but now I realize that the people who brought casseroles and cards, who called and prayed and dropped off Our Daily Bread – they were living out Philippians 1:3–6.

They were partners in the gospel not because they were Billy Graham but because they were more like Betty Crocker; bringing light and love into a dark situation through very simple means...food. And cards, and care.

They were part of the good work God was doing. Their love became the hands of Christ in our home. Their prayers became a gentle and sustaining wave of hope and grace that carried us through heavy days.

And what Paul says next might be one of the most hopeful promises in all of Scripture:

“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

We live in a world where so much feels incomplete — conversations cut short, relationships strained, good intentions that fall apart, hopes deferred. But Paul’s words remind us that God is not finished yet.

Gratitude opens our eyes to that truth. When we give thanks, we recognize the fingerprints of grace all around us — in one another, in small mercies, in the daily evidence that God is still at work.

That’s why gratitude is not primarily just polite manners or a fleeting feeling; it’s a spiritual discipline that reorients our hearts toward trust. It says, “Even here, even now, God is working. Thank you, God!”

Think of Paul in that prison cell — isolated, uncertain, unable to visit his friends — and yet, through gratitude, he experiences communion. His thanksgiving becomes a bridge, spanning the miles, joining hearts across distance and circumstance.

Gratitude does that for us too. It reminds us that God’s good work is never done in isolation but always through relationship.

As a church, every act of shared gratitude — every handshake, every prayer, every note of thanks — builds the kind of community Paul cherished. When we pass the peace or bow our heads in prayer for one another, we are living out that same partnership in the gospel.

We are saying, “I thank my God every time I remember you.”

And maybe that's where we begin to heal our lonely world — not by grand gestures, but by daily choosing gratitude. By remembering each other. By thanking God for the people who walk beside us, for the community that holds us, for the good work that God is still completing among us and through us.

So, as we pull together and move forward together, may we echo Paul's prayer: "I thank my God every time I remember you."

May our hearts open in gratitude — for the beauty of creation, for the gift of one another, and for the faithful God who began a good work in us and will carry it to completion. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Time of Reflection:

Who in your life are you thankful for right now — someone whose presence, prayers, or kindness reminds you of God's grace?

(Take a moment to thank God for them and consider how you might express that gratitude this week.)

Where do you see evidence that "God's good work" is still unfolding — in your life, our church, or the world around you?

(How might practicing gratitude help you notice and join in that work more fully?)