

Amy Bost Henegar  
Seaver College Baccalaureate Service  
Pepperdine University, Malibu, California  
April 27, 2012

It is an honor to be with you today. Not only is this an opportunity for me to return to a location and a people who occupy an important place deep in my heart, but this very month is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my own graduation from Pepperdine University. If you had told me twenty years ago that I would be here today, doing this, I guarantee you that I would not have believed you. But here we are! And while I'm sure the time you have spent at Pepperdine has gone by in the blink of an eye, let me tell you, so has twenty years!

Every time I find myself in a situation where I'm shocked at how quickly the time has passed, I'm reminded of something C.S. Lewis wrote about time. He said *"Do fish complain of the sea for being wet? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been, or would not always be, purely aquatic creatures? Notice how we are perpetually surprised at time... In heaven's name, why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is not temporal."*

Thus, here we are, eternal creatures living in a temporal world, and we are continually shocked at how quickly the time passes. I was a twenty-two year old, sitting in my cap and gown at Alumni field, wondering how my life would unfold; and as in a fairy tale, it seems as though I closed my eyes, turned around twice, and here I am - a forty-two year old woman, with a husband and four kids, a mortgage, a dog, a job and a minivan!

And the craziest thing is how many times I open my mouth to speak to my children and realize I've turned into my mother! Not just my own mother, but I've become one of *those* mothers -- the ones you see on TV. The ones who say all of those motherly things that I was never going to say because I was going to to be different and original and modern!

But here I am, almost eleven years into being a parent, and I hear the words come out of my mouth...

"You do it because I told you to do it!"

or

"When I was a kid we didn't even have the internet."

or

"You're bored? Well find something to do or I'll give you something to do."

or

“If your *brother* told you to *jump off the Brooklyn Bridge*, would you do that?”

And the classic:

“No singing at the table!”

You might wonder where this rule came from. I'll tell you where. Like so many mothers before me, I've learned that after a long day it is really, really annoying to have your children sing at the table!

There is something else I say to my kids almost every day. Inevitably we're sitting at the dinner table and someone takes about three bites then pushes back from the table and declares “I'm done. Can I get up now?”

And I immediately launch into the classic motherly speech: “Clean your plate! Why do I even go to the trouble of making you dinner if you're not going to eat it! This food is good! Don't you know there are kids starving somewhere? You should be grateful!”

I look at the plates full of food on the table in front of these kids, at the roof over their heads and the clothes on their backs, the privilege they have had of being able to enjoy a childhood full of blessing and provision, being cared for by people who love them, and I know in the very deep parts of my soul that this is not the case for many children in this world. As my hearts breaks for the needs of those many children, my frustration mounts with my own because they should be grateful for what they have! They should realize that these are gifts and none of them should be taken for granted!

But they are just children. They don't understand this. The food, the shelter, the shoulder to cry on... they have always had these so they assume they will always be there. And they assume everyone else has them as well. A birthday filled with beautiful packages filled with wonderful gifts is expected. It is only as they grow up that they come to realize the tragic realities of a broken world.

However my reaction is actually quite appropriate. There is something particularly upsetting about ingratitude. We know in our very souls how important it is to be grateful.

Lewis Smedes, who was my ethics professor at Fuller Seminary, described it this way: “*Ingratitude decays the spirit, spoils the soul, decomposes life itself.*”

Yet if I command my kids to be grateful it does nothing to move them, even an inch, in the direction of experiencing gratitude. Can I do anything to force authentic gratitude? Does anyone, adult or child, ever feel grateful purely out of a sense of obligation?

All through the Bible we are admonished to live lives of gratitude.

The psalmist says “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.”

The apostle Paul says in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

We could jump all over the Bible looking at examples of gratitude and admonitions toward gratitude, but I want to spend a little time looking at a simple narrative from the life of Jesus. The story is found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 17. We usually refer to it as “Healing of the Ten Lepers.”

Hear the word of the Lord:

Luke 17:11-19

*As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he passed along the borderlands between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into one particular village he was met by ten lepers, who stayed at some distance from him.*

*‘Jesus, Master!’ they called out loudly. ‘Have pity on us!’*

*When Jesus saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were healed.*

*One of them, seeing that he had been healed, turned back and gave glory to God at the top of his voice. He fell on his face in front of Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.*

*‘There were ten of you healed, weren’t there?’ responded Jesus. ‘Where are the nine? Is it really the case that the only one who had the decency to give God the glory was this foreigner?’*

*‘Get up, and be on your way,’ he said to him. ‘Your faith has saved you.’*

May God bless the the reading of his divine word.

This story sounds so simple doesn’t it?

There are ten men afflicted with a specific disease, leprosy, that was wreaking havoc on their bodies and keeping them completely isolated from their families and their communities.

They see Jesus from a distance. Clearly they know that he has healed people so they shout to him for mercy.

And Jesus responds. But in a bit of a mysterious way. He doesn't respond by speaking words of healing. Rather he tells them to go to the priests, the ones who have the power to declare them ritually clean and thus able to re-enter the community.

The text tells us that *on the way to the priests, all ten are healed*. Their leprosy is completely gone.

Nine of the men continue of their way.  
One returns to say "Thank you."

At first glance this story seems so simple. Jesus did something nice for ten men, and only one responded appropriately. When someone does something nice for you, you say "thank you" right? It is a simple social transaction.

But this was no ordinary social transaction. The text says that when he saw he had been healed, he turned back and *gave glory to God at the top of his voice and fell on his face thanking Jesus*. He wasn't saying "thank you" to be polite. He fell on his face thanking Jesus because his heart was overflowing with gratitude.

He saw and understood that his life had been completely changed. He had been given the greatest of gifts -- healing, wholeness, life. He had cried out for mercy and he had received the healing mercy of Jesus. He had been rescued from his life of illness and isolation. His life had been restored.

And when he received this gift, he in turn felt the urgent desire to return to the giver, to bless the name of the one who gave. Thus he returned, as the text says, *to praise God and thank Jesus*.

In Jesus's final words we find a clue as to the spiritual dimension of this interaction. His response to the man is this: Rise and go, your faith has saved you. *Your faith has saved you*. Jesus doesn't commend the man for his gratitude. He calls it faith. Saving faith.

Apparently, Christian faith looks a lot like gratitude.

Christian faith is seeing the world, seeing life, as a gift from God, and responding in gratitude. Christian faith is our response of gratitude to the healing mercy of Jesus.

As the British theologian N.T. Wright has said: *"When we learn to read the story of Jesus and see it as the story of the love of God, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves--that insight produces, again and again, a sense of astonished gratitude which is very near the heart of authentic Christian experience."*

What would make you shout for joy at the top of your voice? What would make you fall on the ground in gratitude? Maybe finishing all of your final exams and being handed a

diploma after years of hard work? The gift of an education. That's a very significant gift.

But, as I mentioned, you can't force gratitude, just as you can't force faith. Only the heart that stays open, seeking and knocking can receive faith. And with faith comes a deeply held gratitude that will permeate every relationship, action and work God has in store for you.

With that in mind, I want to give you three suggestions to take with you today as you think about living in grateful joy.

### **1) Celebrate imperfect gifts.**

In a broken world, very few gifts are perfect. Relationships have their struggles, education has student loans, newborn babies keep you up all night. But if we focus on the flaws, we quench the joy.

Celebrate all of the gifts in your life in all their imperfect glory.

### **2) Be grateful for the good in your life and in the world, in spite of the bad you see every day.**

Sometimes it just doesn't seem fair to rejoice while others are suffering. We feel guilty if we celebrate when sadness seems to loom around every corner. However, as one writer explains,

*If we wait for every beggar to have his horse, we shall never be grateful for a ride.  
If we wait for every person to be fed, we shall never be grateful for our daily bread.  
If we wait for every person in the world to have a roof, we shall never be grateful for the roof that covers us while we sleep.  
If we wait until no one ever dies, we shall never feel grateful for life.*  
(Smedes, A Pretty Good Person)

Be grateful for the good in your life and in the world, in spite of the bad.

And finally,

### **3) Decide to act grateful even if you don't feel grateful. In other words, fake it till you make it!**

The joyful experience of authentic gratitude cannot be forced, but we *can* choose to *practice* gratitude even when we don't feel grateful. The *practice* of gratitude is the *explicit effort to acknowledge* that all we are and all we have is given as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.

Practice gratitude even when your emotions aren't there.

And so today I ask you, what are you grateful for and who are you grateful to? Who are the people that have loved you into being? Right now, take ten seconds and think about the people whose shoulders you have stood on to reach the place you're at today.

Make a point of saying "thank you." However you want to do it. You can text it, tweet it, post it on Facebook, Instagram... whatever you want to do. In fact you can pull out your phone and do it right now! It's okay with me.

Say "Thank You." Not because you *have to*, not even because you *should*, but because it closes the circle of grace given and grace received, the rhythm of a life marked by gratitude.

And finally, I ask you this. How has Jesus healed you? How has Jesus saved you? How has God given life - true, meaningful, Eternal Life - to your life? When the excitement dies down and all the graduation parties are over, find a place away from the crowd where you can give glory to God at the top of your voice, and fall on your face in gratitude.

I'll close with this quote:

*"The strongest and brightest of us are as fragile as a floating bubble, unsteady as a newborn kitten on a waxed kitchen floor. If we keep our footing in the shaky space between our arrival and departure from this world, we owe our survival -- not to mention our success -- to many other people who held us up and helped us crawl or fly or just muck our way through. And to God, who keeps breathing life into our lungs the way a child keeps puffing air into a leaking balloon... The only reason why any of us should exist at all lies in the mystery of why the creator should have desired to share [with us] the gift of life."*

(Lewis Smedes, A Pretty Good Person)

May the Lord bless you with a heart full of gratitude, as you go forth from this place, rejoicing in the goodness of God's love. Amen.