

Luke 1:68-79
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Say a Little Prayer

We're on the cusp of a new year, not when the calendar shifts from one calendar year to the next but to the new school year. Even though it has been years since I studied for an exam or took notes listening to a teacher speak, there is still something deep within me that loves browsing the aisles of school supplies at Target and gets excited about new pencils and fresh, clean notebooks. And even though I am not memorizing a new schedule or anxious about new teachers, I find myself making New Year's resolutions of sorts. I resolve to go to bed earlier, wake up earlier, eat better, finish things on time, and be—and stay—more organized. But I've never been all that good at keeping resolutions at the beginning of the school year or any other year for that matter. It turns out, I'm not alone. Studies over the years have looked at ways to improve self-control and will power, which both work to a certain extent, but still nearly 90% of all new year's resolutions fall by the wayside by the time the next one rolls around. Just gritting it through alone is not enough. In fact, gritting it out raises our stress level and makes us anxious and sets us up to fall short of all we resolve to do. However, if we sprinkle in a bit of gratitude, our odds go way up. Researchers have found that being filled with gratitude improves outlooks, increases academic success, and makes us more willing to help others. It's also good for us. It's actually healing:

If using willpower causes stress, using [emotions such as gratitude, along with compassion and healthy pride] actually heals: They slow heart rate, lower blood pressure and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression.¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/opinion/sunday/the-only-way-to-keep-your-resolutions.html>

Sign me up! But it's not that simple. Gratitude takes practice. It's not our default drive, not for most of us anyway. The world around us banks on our anxiety about scarcity, on our fixation on what we don't have. We need help learning how to be grateful, like learning a new language or a new skill like riding a bike. It takes practice, and it helps if we have someone—or multiple someones—to practice with.

It is clear that Thomas Chisolm, the writer of this morning's hymn favorite, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," had just such a group of someones:

[Chisolm] was born in a log cabin in Kentucky in 1866, and he lived a pretty unremarkable life: he worked as a school teacher, a newspaper editor, and insurance agent, then he retired and spent his remaining days at the Methodist Home for the Aged in New Jersey. Unlike many hymns that have heart-wrenching stories behind them... 'Great Is Thy Faithfulness' is inspired by the simple realization that God is at work in our lives on a daily basis. He wrote, 'My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.'²

Thomas Chisolm came to faith at the age of 26. Clearly, the community he worshiped with helped him learn this skill of gratitude, helped him shape how he viewed life in the world.

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

Zechariah is steeped in such a community, too. A priest who along with his wife Elizabeth is "getting on in years," is told by the angel Gabriel that he and Elizabeth will welcome

² Greg Sheer in 1994, as cited here: https://hymnary.org/text/great_is_thy_faithfulness_o_god_my_fathe

a son and that they will name him John.³ Upon receiving this news, an astonished Zechariah finds himself unable to speak. Until the child is born, that is, and then his words overflow with gratitude for the promises God has made and kept in the birth of this child and the coming birth of his cousin, Jesus. He speaks of God's faithfulness in the past in calling Abraham and freeing the slaves from Egypt. And he speaks of the coming blessing in Jesus the Christ who brings salvation and forgiveness of sins:

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.⁴

The birth of John and Jesus are grand examples of what Thomas Chisolm would call, "the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God." *Morning by morning new mercies I see.*

One thing that I appreciate about Chisolm and Zechariah to a lesser extent is how everyday their gratitude is. Yes, Zechariah's son will go on to be the one to baptize Jesus and point others to the son of God, but neither Zechariah nor Thomas Chisolm is a household name. After this morning's text, Zechariah fades back into his everyday world of serving as a priest in the temple rather quickly. He is quickly overshadowed by Mary, Joseph, disciples, prodigals, Pharisees, and of course, Jesus. And yet I am fairly certain that Zechariah continues to recognize and name the blessings in his midst and to give thanks to God for those blessings, just as Chisolm did and helps us to do whenever we sing this beloved hymn.

I like to think we are pretty good at this whole gratitude thing. Our Reformed Protestant tradition is grounded in the belief that we do not earn God's love, that grace is freely given in

³ Luke 1:7-13

⁴ Luke 1:78-79

Jesus Christ, and that we live a life of gratitude in response to that grace, but I wonder how true that is in our everyday life. Do we live grateful lives? Do I live a grateful life? Maybe I need someone, or someones to help me do just that.

I was reminded earlier this week of the Jewish practice of offering 100 blessings—or prayers of thanksgiving to God each day. There are set prayers that Orthodox Jewish men are expected to pray at meals and when gathered for worship and at other times, but when I consulted the all-knowing Google to see how this practice plays out with everyday people, I stumbled upon a blog post by a woman named Rivkah Lambert Adler. She explains to people like me that:

For the most part, Orthodox men who pray with a minyan three times a day can get most of these *brachot* in during formal prayer. Add to that the blessings said before and after eating and after using the bathroom and for most people in this category, hitting 100 *brachot* a day is pretty doable.⁵

For these men, daily routines serve as prompts to thank God, almost like the Aretha Franklin song, “I Say a Little Prayer”:

The moment I wake up
Before I put on my makeup,
I say a little prayer for you...
I run for the bus, dear
And while riding I think of us, dear,
I say a little prayer...
And at work I just take time

⁵ Rivkah Lambert Adler, <http://jewishvaluesonline.org/jvoblog/100-blessings>. A minyan is the number of Jewish men required to constitute a congregation for worship.

And all through my coffee break time,

I say a little prayer...⁶

Adler says she adopted the practice of saying 10 each night before bed, but she later decided to see if she really could work in 100. So now she sits down with a book and for each page up to 100 she thanks God for a specific thing. She gives some examples such as: “the ability to see color, clean dishes, a healthy marriage, the ability to read, teachers from whom I can learn, hot pizza, cold water.”⁷ I would add coffee, the smell of honeysuckle, my family, my church, the beach, biscuits, and grits, among others.

Hitting 100 is pretty doable, Adler says, if it’s built in to her daily practice...Sounds like those of us who track our steps. If you walk the dog a couple of times a day, getting in 10,000 steps is also doable. But tracking prayers? 100 prayers? I’d like to try it. Because in order to find 100 things to thank God for, I will have to be looking for 100 things to thank God for, and I will see them. As Adler says, the point of the list is less about the items on it, and more about “[inspiring us] to realize how many *brachot* [God] showers us with every moment.”⁸ *Morning by morning new mercies I see.*

Who’s with me? I see new FitBit users asking for buddies to motivate them and help them get their steps in. They rely on this partnership, this community to prompt them to move in the midst of their everyday lives. I need those prompts, those reminders, that kind of community around me. Because it’s actually about more than logging 100 prayers. And it’s about more than having a better attitude or making better grades or even lowering my blood pressure. And it is not about bragging rights or a contest to see how we can claim to be more beloved than others,

⁶ <https://genius.com/Aretha-franklin-i-say-a-little-prayer-lyrics>

⁷ Adler

⁸ Adler

more blessed than our neighbors. Looking for reasons to thank God in the thick of my everyday comings and goings, naming 100 blessings is not about me in the end. Not at all. It is about worshipping the God who is faithful beyond measure even when I am not. It is about learning to see anew and allowing my heart to be trained and shaped to be grateful for the mercies all around me. It is about transforming me and us as the people of God to walk and work in God's world in a way that is grateful instead of grasping, in a way that is humble rather than entitled, in a way that more faithfully reflects the God who has claimed us as God's own. Because the mercies are not new, not really. Our God is faithful and generous. Always has been. Always will be. Looking for these mercies with fresh eyes changes us. Looking for the blessings enables us to see them anew and to see the God who offers them more clearly. And by the grace of that same God, the more mercies we see, the more mercies we name, the more mercies we thank God for, the more the world around us may see our faithful and generous God reflected in us. *Morning by morning new mercies I see.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.