



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Giving Thanks for All God's Good Gifts

SCRIPTURE:  
Psalm 138

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Nov. 19, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**W**e're going to start today with a Hebrew lesson. Sometime ago, we learned the word "ruach." Please say that with me. "Ruach." It means wind, breath, spirit. So when you breathe, you are taking in God's spirit. And when you step outside and feel the wind, it is God's breath moving over you and lifting you. "Ruach."

The new word for today is "chesed." In Hebrew it means "kindness" or "love" but it is so much more than that. There really is no good English translation for chesed. In Jewish theology, chesed is what God has for us. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we read most often around here, it is translated as "steadfast love." Other translations say, "unfailing love" (New International Version) or "loyal love" (Common English Bible). They sort of get there but so much is lacking. Steadfast love is the closest I think we can come to what God does for and to us, but it is more. Chesed is God's eager love for us. Even God's aggressive love for us. Hebrew scholars tell us there is a zeal in chesed. It is as if God pursues us with God's love. God seeks after us.

So when the psalmist sings, "I give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and faithfulness," it is "chesed." God's steadfast love for us, for you. It is God's eager love for us. God's aggressive love for us. That's the power of chesed. And we know of God's chesed and faithfulness because of the abundance of God's gifts for us—God's blessing for us all in Jesus Christ.

Theologian George Stroup says there are 'bad news/good news' people and 'good news/bad news' people. The 'bad news/good news' people say, "Bad news: You are sinful and going to hell.

Good news: If you try hard enough, God will save you." The 'good news/bad news' people say, "Good news: God has saved you through Jesus. Bad news: You need to try to be good anyway."

George Stroup says we Presbyterians are the 'good news/bad news' people. Good news: God has saved you in Jesus Christ and there is nothing you can do or not do to change that. Bad news: In response to God's gift of grace, we need to try to be good anyway.

That's what giving thanks to God is all about. We give thanks not to earn God's love. We can never do enough to earn God's love. God's love is already given. What we do is offer our lives as a way to give thanks in response to God's amazing gift of love.

When I joined the faculty at Columbia Seminary, I overlapped for a little more than a year with Dr. Shirley Guthrie, a brilliant theologian. Dr. Guthrie wrote the book titled, "Christian Doctrine," which I still believe to this day is one of the finest texts on systematic theology in the English language. I found Shirley to be charming and so humble and above all... grateful. Whenever I would see him on campus, I would greet him, "Professor Guthrie, how are you?" and he would smile this winsome smile and respond, "Always grateful."

After he retired, and much to my sadness, became ill and was dying, I went to visit him and his wife Vivian in their home. I sat by his bed and took his hand and said, "Hello Professor. How are you?" And Shirley looked at me and smiled weakly and said, "Always grateful."

Chesed. God loves us with an aggressive love. A steadfast love. An unfailing love. And our response is to be grateful. We give thanks this week of Thanksgiving because of all that

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has been given to us—even in our grief because someone is missing at our table. Even in the midst of sadness because a relationship has ended. Even in the midst of worry because of a job loss. Even in the midst of fear because of a diagnosis. Still, Dr. Guthrie reminds us, we are “always grateful” for God’s chesed.

Being thankful is a pattern for us. When I was with a group of young adults in Ghana, during our almost two weeks there, for part of the time we were hosted by families in Tema, a city on the coast east of Accra. I was staying in the home of Mrs. Ayisi and her family who told me to call her Mama. On Sunday morning, we were leaving the house to walk to church for services. As we were walking on the street, Mama told me to put out my hand which I did. Then she put some Ghanaian dollars into it. “For offering today,” she said. “To give back to God.” She wanted me to be sure to have something to put in the offering plate. I was charmed. I felt like I was eight years old.

I was going to refuse the money. What she did not know was that I had \$2,000 dollars in cash with me in my money belt that I was planning to put in the offering plate as a gift from Columbia Seminary to the small church whose faithful members hosted me and my students for the weekend. But the Holy Spirit is faithful and true and held me back from refusing Mama’s money. I just thanked her and put it in my pants’ pocket.

During the worship service, when it came time for offering—some of you have experienced this—the ushers do not come forward as we do and decently and orderly pass the plate through the pews. No. The Presbyterians in Ghana and

other parts of Africa dance their offering down the center aisle of the church up to the front of the Sanctuary. And the congregation is clapping and cheering for everyone as we put our money in the offering plate which the pastor and elders are holding. Literally. Dance. The music is jubilant and people are waving handkerchiefs. I danced the offering from the seminary and put the money from the seminary in the plate and danced back to my seat.

I thought we were done but no, we were not. The pastor then said, “God has given us so much, let’s give even more back to God. Let’s go again!” And people started dancing again down the aisle. Well, I had not counted on more than one offering so I had given all of the seminary’s contribution and it was then that I remembered Mama’s money and I was so grateful as I reached into my pocket and took out the five Ghanaian dollars and put it into the plate and somehow, I think the Holy Spirit celebrated that more than the seminary’s contribution.

The psalmist sings, “<sup>1</sup>I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; <sup>2</sup>I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.”

I have good news for you! Do you want to hear it? God has saved you by grace in Jesus Christ. Now... let’s respond to God with our lives in thanks and praise!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.