



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
November 18, 2018 Sermon

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## How Not to Take Things for Granted

Scripture Lessons: Ecclesiastes 7:1-3, 8-14 (from *The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson, trans.)  
Luke 15:11-24

“Let Her Go”—it was a *big* hit by *Passenger* about five or six years ago. Even if you don’t recognize the name of the song or the artist, I bet you’ve heard it.

*Cause you only miss the sun when it starts to snow  
Only know you’ve been high  
when you’re feeling low  
Only hate the road when you’re missing home  
Only know you love her when you let her go.  
And you let her go*

It’s a love song, or rather, a love-lost song. It was #1 on the charts in over 40 countries from Austria to Australia, Luxembourg to Lebanon, Sweden to South Africa. And of course here in the U.S. as well.

I know the lyrics can sound a little corny or even cheesy when you just say them, or maybe when *I* sing them, but for a song to have that kind of worldwide popularity, it’s got to capture something: some experience that we human beings share, something universal, what I call a “home truth.” A home truth is the kind of thing your great uncle says every year over Thanksgiving dinner, or you say to a stranger while waiting to board the plane, or we say to one another as we’re standing in the receiving line at the funeral home. A home truth is the kind of saying you find in the wisdom literature, including the Book of Ecclesiastes.

In this case, here’s the home truth: you don’t know what you got til it’s gone. Or to put it another way: you never how good you had it, until you don’t. Or to put it still another way: we don’t fully appreciate people or things until we lose them.

Now, that may well be a home truth—it certainly describes how we feel sometimes, especially in times of loss—but it can’t really be the only truth or the whole true, *can it?* We can’t only love—truly love—in absentia, that is, when what we love or the person we love, is no longer with us. *Can we?* That would be tantamount to saying that that we never really love at all—or at least never love fully. Tantamount to saying that our lives are defined by both a never-ending failure to love in the moment and a never-ending regret of that failure.

And so to counteract, or at least to counterbalance, that home truth, a whole host of other home truths, usually framed as positive imperatives, have developed. You know, like: “count your blessings”; “stop and smell the roses”; “live in the moment”; “make the most of life”; or that Latin bromide of graduation speeches, “Carpe Diem”: “Seize the Day.”

Now I have to tell you: I've never been very good at all that. Oh, it's not that I don't try. When something reminds me of the brevity, fragility and ephemerality of life, when something happens that wakes me up, shakes me up, pulls me up short and so reminds me once again that life is short, time is fleeting, and that you never, ever know, it's *then* that I resolve—*once again*—to count, stop, smell, live, make the most of, and *carpe the diem*. *But it never lasts*. I even put little inspirational reminders on my refrigerator, my to-do list, and the bulletin board above my desk: "Today is *the* day—live it." "Live and love well." They *never* work—at least not for long.

Apparently, I'm not the only one with this difficulty: you can go online and find all kinds of websites with self-help programs to help you appreciate and make the most of life:

***Gratitude: A 30-Day Challenge***: I never made it past day 3.

***An Attitude of Gratitude: Ten Steps to a More Grateful Lifestyle***: I tripped up on step 2.

***Eight Easy Ways to Become a More Grateful Person***: Way#4 was not easy—at least not for me.

Look, I'm not casting aspersions on these home truths. I say them too. I know a young woman—she just had her first child: "Enjoy every minute of it," I said to her, "they grow up so fast." That's the *exact* same thing I remember so many people saying to me 25 years ago.

And it is *good* advice: I feel the truth of it more and more every day: I look at my children, and think, "Where did the time go?"

It's just not the *most helpful* advice when . . . well, when you're [mimic the action of changing a diaper] changing your 12th dirty diaper of the day, or when [mimic waiting parent] you're waiting for your teenager to come home two hours past curfew. Do you still count it as a blessing if you're *not* enjoying every minute of it, if in fact, you want the time to go by faster?

What we need—OK, I'll speak for myself: what *I* need, is knowledge that goes all the way down. Not knowledge just on my refrigerator or to-do list, or bulletin board, not knowledge just on-line or in the latest self-help book, not knowledge just on my lips or flitting about in my brain, but knowledge that goes all the way down to the heart—what John Calvin calls, "knowledge of the heart"—knowledge that becomes part of me, and shapes everything I say and do, reflexively.

Knowledge that makes me aware of my blessings in good times *and* in bad, knowledge that helps me to see them and count them all the time without even having to count them, knowledge that helps me to see, and to appreciate, that everything we have, every moment, life itself, is a gift from God, and not to be taken for granted.

Now I grant you that such knowledge is not easy to come by: it takes time and experience, sometimes painful experience. Maybe we do need to watch a child grow up and move away to realize what a gift each child is. Maybe we do need to lose a friend to realize what a gift that friend was, and friendship still is. Back to Ecclesiastes:

*You learn more at a funeral than at a feast—  
After all, that's where we'll end up. We might discover  
something from it. Crying scours the heart.*

Crying scours the heart, and that hurts, but a scoured heart may be more receptive to, more appreciative of, the gifts we've been given.

Again, Ecclesiastes:

*Take a good look at God's work.  
Who could simplify and reduce Creation's curves and angles  
To a plain straight line?*

*On a good day, enjoy yourself;  
On a bad day, examine your conscience.  
God arranges for both kinds of days  
So that we won't take anything for granted.*

Now, how do we do that? Not take things for granted, I mean. Because, we are so prone to take things for granted, witness the Passenger song. And I agree with the home truth of that song at least to this extent: sometimes we do need to lose something before we can fully appreciate it.

*So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!'*

You only miss the sun when it starts to snow.  
Only hate the road when you're missing home  
Only miss Dad's table when food's running low  
Only know his love when you let it go.  
And you let it go.

And boy, oh boy, did he ever let his Father's love go! He spurned it, stomped on it, pretty much spat upon it: "Dad, I wish you were dead so I could have my inheritance now, but since you're not, I'll just take the money." Not exactly an attitude of gratitude.

But then, alone in the fields of that alien country, his money all gone, all the world's supposed pleasures having turned to ashes in his mouth, of no account to anyone not even himself, hungry enough to eat anything but having nothing at all to eat, then, "he came to himself."  
"He came to himself" only to discover . . . well, only to discover what? Yes, that he had a better chance of getting fed back home than anywhere else. But more than that, as his father comes running to meet him, hug him, and kiss him, as his father calls for the best robe, the ring, the fatted calf, as his father rolls out the big feast, the big party—for him, the prodigal son!—he discovers that his father's love had *never* let him go even when he let him go his own way. Even when that ungrateful son had spurned that love, even when he had said, "I don't want anything to do with you ever again; you're not my father, I'm outta here" even *then*, the father did not give up loving him, did not let him out of his heart, never gave up watching and waiting and hoping—and loving. The Prodigal Son

comes to himself only to discover what at some level he had always known but had somehow forgotten: that his father loved him—always had, always will.

It's pretty simple: God is the Father; we're the Prodigal Son; and it's in Jesus that God comes running to meet us, embrace us, kiss us; it's in Jesus that God celebrates and delights in our very being, and in our being with him. It's in Jesus that we come home. That's the home truth Jesus tells with this parable. In other words, he's telling us the home truth that God counts **us** as a blessing; yes, *us*; yes, even when we fail to count our blessings. It is **not** our never-ending failure to love and never-ending regret of that failure that defines our lives. No, it is God's never-ending love for us and this world, and God's never-ending redeeming love for all creation in Jesus Christ—*that's* what defines our lives. *That's* what enables us to live and love fully—*both* in the moment *and* forever.

Maybe if we put that home truth in our hearts, maybe if it becomes knowledge all the way down, then maybe then all the thirty-day challenges, ten steps, and eight ways—maybe then all the inspirational sayings on our refrigerators, to-do lists and bulletin boards—maybe then they can do their work, which is to remind us of what we already deep-down know.

This week is thanksgiving week: which means the week of homecomings, hugs and kisses; of family and friends; of feasting and celebration, the week when your great uncle delivers his all-too-familiar home truths over the turkey, and we all count our blessings, especially when he stops.

And today is the Sunday *before* Thanksgiving which here at Westminster means the day of Choral Vespers, with Mendelssohn's Six Motets for the the Church Year and Mozart's *Coronation Mass* complete with Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei, *followed* by the Annual Harvest Dinner, with Hand-carved turkey breast, apple-cranberry chutney, and real mashed potatoes with Douro pan gravy; slow roasted beets with thyme and Feta, autumn asparagus; roasted butternut squash, wild rice salad with cranberries and mint, sweet potato and sweet red pepper salad; complete with traditional Westminster pecan chocolate pie; pumpkin custard pie; *and* flourless carrot cake.

There are more blessings—far more—in Choral Vespers and the Harvest Dinner, here at Westminster and in our lives—far more—than we can possibly count.

Let the celebration begin.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . And Happy Thanksgiving!

Amen.