

# GIFT OF GRATITUDE (WEEK 3 OF LENT)

## STUDY GUIDE FOR SECTION THREE

- Pray a centering prayer for guidance for the discussion of the “Gift of Gratitude” section.
  - The Latin word **GRATIS** is the root for gratitude, the attitude of thankfulness. Thanksgiving is a key theme in the biblical witness as God’s people recognize that all creation – life itself – is from God. We give our thanks and praise to God in our worship. Indeed, the heart of Holy Communion is known as the “Great Thanksgiving.” We also thank God through our deeds, living gratefully through sharing God’s bounty with others. Our gifts to AU are examples of living out of an attitude of gratitude to God.
1. Name some of the “saints” in your life. If they are still living, consider ways to let them know how important they have been to you. For those who are no longer with us, consider the suggestion to “repay” them by “giving to the Lord” through gifts to AU and other acts of sharing.
  2. Owen Ross discusses how organized religion, though often criticized, can be “pure and undefiled” before God as the faithful band together to build institutions like AU that have the potential to affirm life and develop leaders who will take on difficult challenges. As United Methodists, we are organized to work together toward such “pure and holy” goals. What are some examples of life-giving ministries in which you have personal involvement? What are some missions that are special to your congregation?
  3. Ronald Henderson describes a wilderness experience as preparation for a new task God has in mind. Do you recall such a time of preparation in your life? What new task might God be calling you to at this time?
  4. Todd Bristow describes how young African boys modeled gratitude to his family. What are some things we should be thanking God for this day? How can counting our blessings make us more generous? How do we model this spirit of generosity to our children?
- Close the session with prayer, remembering the students and faculty at AU and all of those sharing in the Lenten challenge. **ASK FOR GOD’S GUIDANCE ALONG THE WAY.**

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

— MATTHEW 18:1-4

My family had the privilege to host three youth traveling with the Africa Children's Choir. These three boys were in the age range of 8-11 and came from three countries of Africa, but they immediately claimed a kinship with my family. Their humbleness and sincere gratitude for everything gave my family a deeper meaning to our understanding of blessing and thankfulness.

After our first meal together, as each one finished, they stated: "Uncle and Auntie, thank you for this wonderful meal. May I please be excused from the table?"

My wife and I were astounded by the simplicity, yet the deep felt expression of appreciation. Our son just jumped up when he was done and they all went on to play. After our third meal with these three angels, our son said "Mommie, thank you for this meal. May I be excused from the table?"

Our young friends gave us an example of how we need to "in all things give thanks." In our fast-paced lives, we forget to stop and say "thanks." We are quick to remember to bless our food before we eat, yet sometimes we do so mechanically, as if checking off "prayer" on our list of things to do. When we turn our attention to the manifold blessings of God and connect daily with God's graciousness, we truly begin to enter the kingdom of God.

What can you do today to turn your attention to the manifold blessings of God? Supporting the building of the Africa University Health Clinic and Scholarships project will increase the leaders of today and world leaders of tomorrow.

**PRAYER:** Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for all your blessings. Help us to enhance your kingdom on earth by providing the resources that will establish a lighthouse on a hill for higher learning, healthy living, and faithful witness to generations of today and years to come! Amen.

**CHALLENGE:** Please count your blessings, give thanks, and make a gift to AU for each blessing.

*Todd Bristow, First UMC Richardson*

*Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness.  
And He was there in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan,  
and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him.*

— MARK 1:12-14

When Jesus had his wilderness experience, he was in the wilderness for forty days. It took forty days for God to complete what God wanted to do in Jesus' life, so that Jesus would be filled with God's Spirit in order to do the mission God had assigned to Him as Savior of the world. There have been times in my life and ministry when I have had a wilderness experience, that is, a period of suffering or some trial. During these times, I have wanted God to show up immediately. As is His character and wisdom, God never showed up according to my schedule or even pitiful condition. At God's appointed time, God gracefully intervened in my human situation offering me both healing and wholeness. During this wilderness time when God shaped my character and strengthened my faith, I, like Jesus, learned so much about God's strength and faithfulness to me even while in the wilderness.

In retrospect, my wilderness time was a time of preparation for ministry and to fulfill a divine destiny that God had designed before the foundation of the earth. God didn't cause my wilderness experience, but His Spirit kept me there until God completed the preparation that God knew was necessary for the purpose God designed for my life and ministry. Without those experiences and time of developing intimacy with God, I would not have the confidence in Him to be faithful to my calling when things get tough.

Next time you have a wilderness experience, God may just be setting you up for a great and necessary task that God has prepared you to do. That being the case, I thank God for my time in the wilderness – my time of preparation.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, we thank you that in your wisdom you use the difficult times in our lives to prepare us for the great work you have planned for us that is always to advance your kingdom on earth. Help us to be patient with you as you transform us more into your image. Amen.

**CHALLENGE:** Count the steps you take from your car to your church's sanctuary and make a donation to AU for each.

*Ronald D. Henderson, Custer Road UMC Plano*

*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.  
But I say, "Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth,  
and their words unto the ends of the world."*

— ROMANS 10:17-18 (KJV)

Have you heard of the wonderful things that Africa University has done and continues to do? If so, then you know that AU is a beacon of light shining brightly for the continent of Africa and that it needs our help to continue to do so. If you have not heard, then we are here to let you know about all of the positive things that AU is doing, such as helping to support orphanages, spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and offering numerous degrees, including one in agriculture, which teaches people how to use technology efficiently to grow more food.

In 2005, we, along with a 68-member delegation from St. Luke "Community" UMC that included family and friends, embarked upon a mission trip to Zimbabwe. We felt an immediate connection with the land and the people, and as we ministered to them, they ministered back to us through their love of God that was apparent on Sunday morning as we worshiped at various churches, throughout the week as we interacted with individuals from a bishop to a 102-year-old woman, and nightly as we listened to AU's gospel choir.

At Africa University, we heard stories from several students about how grateful they were to be able to attend college and AU in particular. These young people truly wanted to pursue a higher education and then return home in order to make things better not only for their families, but also for their communities and Africa as a whole.

**PRAYER:** Our prayer is that as more people throughout the world hear about what Africa University is doing, they will visit and help support this wonderful institution through their prayers, service, and financial gifts. Amen.

**CHALLENGE:** Count the number of light switches in your home and make a donation (\$1.00, \$5.00, etc.) to AU for each.

*Brian and Selena Alexander, St. Luke "Community" UMC Dallas*



**TRANSFORMING LIVES  
TRANSFORMING AFRICA**



DAY 15, FEBRUARY 22, 2008

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before  
God our Father is this:  
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep  
oneself unstained from the world.*

— JAMES 2:7

I was a student at Africa University in Fall 2000 as part of my seminary education. The semester changed my life. My studies there and my classmates gave me a new perspective on life and ministry. My professors at Africa University were top-notch, having been trained in some of the best universities in Africa, Europe and the U.S. However, the greatest blessing there had to be the pan-African students.

The students at AU welcomed me even though I was the only student from outside of the African continent. With a group of them, we started a big brother/big sister program with the Fairfield Children's Home across the street. I continue to be in contact with the orphanage, classmates and Africa University through the Fairfield Outreach and Sponsors Association, [www.fosakids.org](http://www.fosakids.org).

When I see on the news the violence, the poverty, the AIDS, and the rising number of orphans, my heart cries out to the Lord for help. While organized religion is often given a bad reputation, it is organized religion that has built a university in Zimbabwe to raise up new leaders to address these challenges. It is organized religion that has built children's homes and orphanages around the world, and it is organized religion that is sending thousands of mosquito nets across the African continent. This is the organized religion that is pure and undefiled before God our Father.

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me to practice Your religion and to serve you. Be with all of the crying orphans in the world. Lead your church to care for them in their affliction. Amen.

**CHALLENGE:** I will order the cheaper items on the menu and give the money saved to assist the children of Africa.

*Owen Ross, Christ Foundry UMC Dallas*

**DAY 16, FEBRUARY 23, 2008**

*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*

— PSALM 27:14 (NRSV)

When I arrived in Zimbabwe several years ago with a mission group, I was filled with great joy and anticipation. Much to my surprise, within 48 hours I was returning home to the bedside of my father who had a massive heart attack. Although plans were made for my return, the distance between home and Africa could not be quickly eliminated. It just took time. The return trip was a series of hurrying for flight connections; waiting for delayed takeoffs; and finally waiting at the bedside of my father.

Psalm 27:14 stayed on my mind throughout this trip. Without God I would not have had the courage to travel alone or the strength to make the physical or spiritual journey required.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, as I wait in your presence, strengthen my heart and give me the courage to do your will. Amen.

**CHALLENGE:** Today I will skip lunch and find a quiet place for the purpose of again communing with God as I seek renewed strength and courage. I will donate the money I would have spent for lunch to the NTC AU Mission Initiative.

*Annelda Crawford, St. Luke "Community" UMC Dallas*



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