

Giving Thanks to the Lord for this Congregation
A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 111

Five years ago, I celebrated my 20th anniversary of my ordination by writing thank you notes. I believed and still do that I was and am a product of many people's nurturing guidance, education, care and love, and I wanted to write to them and express my gratitude and appreciation for all that they have given me. It probably shocked some people to receive the letters and many wrote me back. I kept those letters in a scrap book which is cherished by me. I wrote to teachers, to friends, to co-workers, to people who mentored me through the years, and yes, even my sisters, my mom, and my husband too. It just seemed like the proper way to celebrate and acknowledge such an important anniversary in my life. If you have ever thought of doing something like this, I urge you to write and communicate your gratitude to individuals, as I had a few college and seminary professors write how meaningful it was for them to learn what their teaching had meant to a student. It made their careers worthwhile and meaningful. Here, and I thought I was thanking them, and they were so terribly thankful for my letter.

And August 30th I celebrate my 25th anniversary. And how auspicious and meaningful to be serving the church that nurtured me throughout my childhood and ordained me a quarter century ago. I truly am blessed. And I thought of how grateful I am for Fairmount Church as I thought about this Sunday. You see, My mother joined this church when I was five years old, so I truly am a product of this church. And when I read the Psalm assigned for this Sunday in the Lectionary, I knew this anniversary was the time to be thanking the Fairmount Congregation for what it has given me.

Listen now for the word of God as it is written by the Psalmist in the 111th psalm.

Great are the works of the Lord! The Psalmist thanks God in Psalm 111 with a whole heart. This psalm and the one following are to go together according to the Bible commentaries. Each poetic line in these Psalms begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The first one is a description of why we praise God, and the second is a description of why the people who follow God are so happy. And the psalmist writes that this message of praise has a consequence in our life style. You see, the character and life of those that follow God conform to God's own character and life. In other words, we become living examples of what we praise and love in God.

The Psalm starts out by listing the reasons for us to praise God. The key word here is God's work. God has instructed the people on how to live and has established a covenant with them. God has given us an example of what to achieve to become in character and deed and has agreed to nurture us and care for us throughout our life. When we praise God we do it with our whole person. We can not just thank God intellectually or in one small part of our being, but worshipping and praising God is done in the context of the congregation. The psalmist sees the place of praise to be here in church together as a worshipping body.

The psalmist then lists the many reasons we are to be grateful to God. The psalmist asks us to ponder the mighty acts of God. These involve both deliverance and the establishment of justice. God just doesn't save us from an evil but cares for us as well. God relates faithfully to us and the relationship is not one sided but is a mutual one between us and God. This covenant God makes with us is truly to be praised.

The psalm then ends as it begins with praise. It describes the essence of praise as being to completely dedicate your self to God. Praise is an active relationship where we look at what God has done, praise God for it, speak of our gratitude, and then act in obedience to God. The outcome of praising god is following God. God's people make a gift to God in grateful response with there whole hearts to what God has done for them. Praise becomes both a liturgy and a life style. As one of my college professors said, "The proper worship of God is the emulation of God's nature".

People of faith are living examples of what they love and praise in God. But that is not news to me, as I was a child of this church. I grew up in an environment where I witnessed adults living out there faith by giving of their

time and talents to Fairmount Church. They were the examples of faithful witnesses to what we learned in Sunday school in our Bible studies. It is funny but as I prepared to preach this sermon, I first tried to remember the impact of the ministers on me as a child and I have to admit, I do not remember a minister having an impact on me until Confirmation year, and even then, I do not remember his name. But what I do remember was all the Lay leaders, the Sunday School teachers and Elders who shaped us and showed us what living as a follower of God meant. As the Psalmist described, these were the people whose character and lives conformed to God's Character and life.

To me as a child, the church was led not by the minister who gave the sermon on Sunday, but by the likes of Karl Bruch, Lois Bing, Walter Bailey, and Dorothy Dickey who lived the church. Stu Miller was a superintendent of the Sunday School and I learned about Moses in the bulrushes story while floating hand made baskets of aluminum foil with plastic baby dolls in tubs of water. I learned the Advent Story during that season while making figures out of pipe cleaners, fabric, and clothes pins for my very own Crèche. Julie Hudson, Steve Minter, Arlyn Neiswander, and Joan Trefts taught us about God's covenant by being there with us and caring enough to know our names. Frank Borchert, Sally Bonebrake, Jerryene Clark, Ed Oberndorf, Jack Ingersoll, and RJ Landgraf did more for showing us what it meant to live life as a Christian than any sermon I ever heard. Oh, and that was probably because we had our own worship service held in the basement or the chapel. When I think of the time that individuals such as Dan Reynolds, Bill and Nora Castle, Fred Vermes, Cornie and Polly Scheid and so many others gave to ensuring that we had not just memorized but understood the 23rd Psalm to get our Bibles in third grade, I am in awe. These and so many countless other adults were the church to me. I learned who God was through their work. The gift these individuals gave to us was to reflect God's care and concern in their volunteer leadership to the church. I am forever grateful to these individuals and so many others who were Fairmount Church to me.

And I also remember the wonderful kids I grew up with in this church. OK, I did learn how to French inhale cigarettes in the upstairs women's room during a church service with some of the girls in my class, but we also helped each other grow in faith in a safe environment during our confirmation year.

My class had Arlyn and MJ Neiswander's daughter, Lois Crawford's daughter, Marion Pritchard Forsythe's son, one of Ann Landefeld's sons, and Amy Carlson's older sister in it. I might not remember the minister, but I remember the wonderful artwork and other reflections of our faith that we presented to the class before we joined in membership.

And even after I went off to college, the congregation at Fairmount Church continued to be a beacon of God's character to me as the congregation and staff kept in contact. I received caring and nurturing letters from Hank Anderson who was a huge support system to me.

As college students, we would come home at Christmas to usher at the Christmas Eve services with the other College age members. One summer David Mcmillan had a Bible study on Ecclesiastes at his home in the evenings for the college students when he thought that our theology was too light and easy. Those of you, who remember him, can appreciate that. I had an internship one summer here where I ran the Jr. High youth group. Sean and Scott Miller, Amy Carson and her twin, and Nana and RJ Langraf's daughter were in it. I do not remember interfacing with the clergy that summer but Anne Kirkhoff and Lois Makulec were my biggest support systems. They taught me about working in a church setting and I had this sunny little office next to the Chapel that had beautiful hand painted walls in yellow flowers painted by a member named Darby Scott. As college students we also ran the summer Sunday school. God, forgive us, but those summers might not have been Fairmount's shining moment in Christian Education!

People do not know the impact they have on others, but this church shaped me as a child and young woman. I was interested in the internship Fairmount offered me at North Presbyterian Church the summer before my senior year in college because I had already decided to go to Social Work School like one of my heroes, Steve Minter. It was only while working at North that I decided to go to seminary as well. Hank Andersen, Steve Minter, Nancy Porter and others helped me navigate through my seminary years serving on a committee that formed to support the six seminary students from our church. For these and all the members of the Fairmount family who molded, shaped, and nurtured me, I am so grateful to God.

So Fairmount Church, I thank God for you this Sunday as I celebrate my 25th anniversary of my ordination. Just as I did five years ago, I am acutely aware that we are the recipients of God's grace and love in the form of the people who mold, guide and love us. The Psalmist praised God and described that the proper response to God's many gifts is to act like the Lord, we praise. I know that I am the beneficiary of a congregation who did and does just that. And for that I am so grateful. And Fairmount Church, the beauty is that you are still doing this for the children in our congregation today. The girls and boys who come here to church school, to the children's choirs, the junior and senior high youth fellowships, and who participate in the service projects are nurtured and taught by another generation of faithful Christians, just as I was. The beauty of this is that the church is made up of you, people emulating the nature of the God we all love. And for that I am so thankful. Amen.

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