Living in Christ, Overflowing with Thankfulness

Gene McAfee
Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
November 15, 2026

“Continue to live lives rooted and built up in Jesus, strengthened in faith, and overflowing with thankfulness.” — Colossians 2:7

Two weeks ago, Elder Jean Reinhold helped us launch this year's stewardship campaign with a terrific sermon on gratitude.

She asked us to write down things we are thankful for at Forest Hill Church, and I was grateful that morning for the privilege of sitting over there in the Monticello transept listening to someone else preach. That's a treat for almost any preacher.

It was great fun – cozy, even – being in the pews with Karen and Peter and Peg and Clementine and Violet and Kylie, listening to a gifted preacher, creative teacher, and dedicated member of this congregation articulate something fundamental to all healthy relationships: gratitude. And we got to help!

Jean read some of our expressions of gratitude during the service, and, as she promised she would, she compiled all those slips of paper into a list that you will receive shortly. She shared that list with me as I prepared for this morning, so let me mention a few more of the things you said you are grateful for at Forest Hill Church.

The Justice Ministry that makes real our commitment to people and programs working to build a better world.

The Adult Sunday School programs and their leaders.

Members who are good at spreadsheets and help explain ideas and budgets.

Our ushers, who welcome people and care for their needs throughout the service.

The amazing children at FHC, and the families who show up with them on Sunday mornings.

Session and its committees, working together to make difficult decisions.

The Labre ministry.

Our Family, Youth and Children's Program and its staff, who nourish the next generation of this congregation and make our children feel so welcome that they actually enjoy coming to church.

The Clerk of Session, Elizabeth, guiding me and the elders with her commitment and leadership.

Loving people.

The Steam Team.

Paul and the Abundance Food Pantry.

Antoinette and Laura and our office volunteers.

And I could go on and on!

You'll see the full list in an email from the church office. It's a wonderful document to read through more than once, because it isn't simply a list of things that people **like** here; it's actually a testimonial of this church's values, **and what we value tells us who we are**.

So I hope you'll put the gratitude list on your refrigerator door with one of those handy magnets containing the theme of this year's stewardship campaign: "Strengthened in faith, overflowing with thankfulness."

I've adapted that theme for this morning's sermon, taking as my text the verse from Colossians on which the campaign is built:

"Continue to live lives rooted and built up in Jesus, strengthened in faith, and overflowing with thankfulness."

Jean reminded us in her sermon of the importance of gratitude in healthy relationships. Over the years that I've counseled couples wanting to get married, one of the things I listen most closely for is whether this is primarily a gratitude-based relationship or a need-based relationship.

And if it sounds to me like there's more need than gratitude in a couple's desire to make their relationship long-term, public, and recognized by the state, I begin to get a little twitchy.

Because there's a difference between a relationship grounded in appreciation for another person and one grounded primarily in what we need from that person.

I have a terrific plumber. Great guy. Responds promptly. Knows his stuff. Friendly. Not the cheapest, but I feel I get what I pay for.

When I need Dan, he shows up. And when I don't need him, he doesn't hear from me and I don't hear from him. And we're okay with that kind of relationship. It's professional.

But personal relationships are different, and church relationships are nothing if not personal.

As you read through the list of what people are grateful for here, you may be struck, as I was, by how often **the personal element** surfaced.

Loving people. The greeters. The genuine affection during the passing of the peace. The devotion of our food pantry volunteers. The people who make children feel welcome. The people who quietly do the work that keeps this congregation going.

It's all about relationships.

And, yes, every relationship involves need. There are times when we're lonely and we need companionship. Times when we're uncertain or confused and need clarity. Times when we wish we had someone to ask, "Is it me, or is this situation totally nuts?"

That's part of being human. And that's part of being church.

But if our relationships are to flourish, they need something more durable than the satisfaction of our immediate needs. They need an appreciation of one another that doesn't disappear when the immediate need has been met. They need gratitude.

And I think that's where the verse from Colossians takes us a little deeper.

Paul doesn't simply tell us to be thankful. He tells us to live lives rooted and built up in Christ, strengthened in faith, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Notice the progression.

Gratitude has roots. It grows out of something. It is grounded in something.

And for us, that something is our life in Christ.

We aren't simply a collection of people who happen to enjoy one another's company, or who find this institution useful, or who appreciate the services it provides.

We are a community rooted in something larger than ourselves, larger than our likes and dislikes, larger even than our politics. We are people who have been gathered into a story of grace, called into a ministry of reconciliation, and invited into a way of life shaped by the love of God made known in Jesus.

And when we begin to recognize that, when we begin to appreciate what we have been given **and what we have been made part of**, gratitude becomes more than an occasional expression of appreciation. It becomes a way of living.

It begins to overflow.

It begins to shape our worldview and our interactions.

It helps us to become more truly our God-given selves.

So I have a little exercise for you as we head into the season of the winter holidays and as I wrap this sermon up short rather than long, since I preached so very long last week.

In addition to the gratitude list you'll receive from the church office, pay attention to the holiday cards and especially the letters that people often enclose. Pay attention to one thing in particular: how often do people mention gratitude?

Along with the updates about the kids and the grandkids and trips taken and challenges met, in virtually every holiday letter I've received across nearly half a century now, gratitude is a recurring theme.

The world may be a mess, as it always is, but people are grateful for whatever blessings they have in spite of the mess.

There may have been deaths or illnesses or other losses that have shaken people to their core, but they remain grateful for the circle of love they still sense around them, even with its new gaps.

The passage of time inevitably requires us to surrender some of our independence or our ability to do things that we used to enjoy. But our cache of memories grows fuller and sweeter, and our gratitude grows in proportion, if we're paying attention.

Gratitude doesn't require us to deny what's difficult or pretend that everything is well. **Gratitude simply refuses to let what's difficult become the whole story.**

And if it helps you pay attention to your blessings, keep a gratitude journal or a blessings notebook. Don't make it another burden you have to carry or a daily obligation you have to fulfill, but make it a resource for joy, a springboard into a mindset and heartset of gratitude.

I've used several of these little notebooks over the years, listing everything from my dog, Chloe, to the beautiful fall trees, to my family and friends, to the privilege of my calling, to my commute to work, to the gym I go to when the weather is frightful.

I try not to take anything in my life for granted.

And that's what Jean's exercise two weeks ago helped all of us do: not take anything for granted at Forest Hill Church.

She asked us to zero in on this one piece of our lives, this Christian community of faith, rooted, built up, and strengthened in Jesus, and overflowing with blessings.

From the young families in the Lee transept to the music Julie Minder coaxes out of their children. From the condition of the building to the beauty of the grounds. From our community outreach through GCC to the music from Ying and our other musicians. From our prayer groups, Bible studies, and adult education programs to the countless acts of kindness and generosity that rarely make it into a list.

Jean gave us the time and space and encouragement to reflect on the blessings in this place.

And here's the thing about gratitude: when your life overflows with thankfulness, the natural impulse is to share.

That's where stewardship comes from.

That’s what stewardship is all about.

Not simply meeting a budget. Not simply keeping an institution going. Not even simply paying for the programs and ministries and personnel we value.

Stewardship is the tangible expression of our gratitude for the life we share in Christ.

Other institutions call it fundraising. We call it stewardship because what we are doing is about more than money.

Stewardship is the giving and receiving of blessings, the sharing of what we have been given, so that the ministry of reconciliation has one more home in this world.

We give because we are grateful to be part of something that matters. That something for Christians is represented by a cross, a wonderfully telling image for a Christian church. Its upright reminds us that our life together is grounded in something that transcends ourselves: the love of God that gives us life and calls us into service. Its crossbeam reminds us that we are connected to one another and to generations of faithful people who were here long before we arrived and whose work we are called to carry forward.

We give because we want others to experience the welcome, the compassion, the challenge, the encouragement, and the love that we have experienced here, in this spiritual and physical ecosystem called Forest Hill Church.

We give because the blessings we receive are not meant to end with us. That’s probably what Paul meant when he spoke of Christian lives “overflowing” with thankfulness.

And one more thing about gratitude: it's not simply a response to blessings we've received. It's a way of seeing the world that enables us to recognize blessings we might otherwise overlook, including blessings that have nothing directly to do with us. Gratitude enlarges

our vision. It helps us see the goodness of God at work beyond the boundaries of our own lives.

When we receive our stewardship packets at Forest Hill Church, we aren't being asked merely to sustain something we enjoy. We are being invited to participate in something that matters.

So spend some time this week with the gratitude list you'll receive shortly. Let it spark some additional insights into the blessings we all receive in this place. Grab a pencil and add to it.

Because I can assure you: no matter how many blessings we identify, there are always more.

And the more we recognize them, the more we have to share. Who knows? I might send my plumber a Christmas card.