

“Gratuity Fatigue”

Sermon on Sunday, October 12, 2025

Dear church,

There is such a thing as “Gratuity Fatigue,” I learned recently, the fatigue that comes from too much tipping. I have experienced it myself... Granted, I did not grow up in a culture where tipping was morally encoded in the public consciousness and as generous as in the US. Let’s just say it, Germans are bad tippers! My wife can tell you all about it, just ask her... On our first travels to Europe, she was shocked by my behavior after I put a few measly coins on the saucer. “What? That’s not an adequate tip, you cheapster!” Cultures can be quite different in that regard... What was expected where I grew up was that people in the service industry get paid a decent wage. Tipping was just a little extra, a token of appreciation, a few coins, nothing more, sometimes less. When I came to this country, I learned that people expected a whopping 20% tip in a restaurant, which, you know, can add up.

Then I was instructed about all the other transactions where tipping had become the norm, whether you buy a coffee, get a haircut, a massage, pick up your car in the parking garage, a seemingly endless list of required gratuity. Sometimes you feel pressure to tip even when you aren’t happy with the service. Sometimes the service is terrible and people still tip. Or am I the only one?

Today, our worship theme is gratitude, which is different from gratuity. To be clear, I don’t want to dissuade you from your own good gratuity habits. Mine have gotten much better as I have become Americanized. But let us also acknowledge that enforced gratuity is not exactly the same as gratitude; it’s just part of a transaction.

Now you want to ask me how I got on this tangent. Did the pastor have a bad experience last week? Did I give a tip that wasn’t really deserved? No, none of that. Maybe I should have given a tip to some of the volunteers here in church. They deserve it. But no, the reading from 2. Kings caught my eye. Did you notice what’s going on at the end of the story? The prophet Elisha refuses the gratuity that the Syrian military commander offers as a sign of his appreciation for the healing he had received under the guidance of the holy man. He had been healed of leprosy, which was the cancer of that time, the big dreaded disease. Naaman’s gift was likely going to be a substantial one. He had means. But the prophet refused, “As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And despite the Syrian commander’s urgent attempts to give something back, Elisha’s mind was made up. He did not take the gift. Why not? We might say he deserved it. We might say he lived a simple enough life-style and could

have used the gift, even if he gave it to the poor. But here is the rub and the spiritual lesson: there are certain moments when we need to do something and not get paid for it. It's part of being a servant of God. A word of thanks and heartfelt gratitude is enough sometimes. The prophet did not want to be compromised in any way. And he felt that the gift of healing was not his but God's to begin with.

Gratuity can also be tricky, ethically tricky. We have all heard of corrupt politicians taking kickbacks or benefiting from insider knowledge to increase their fortunes. There are laws against that. There are people in prison for breaking those laws. There are ethical standards in many professions that give you clear guidance about what not to accept as a gift, as not to be compromised or beholden to certain people.

While gratuity tends to be part of a transaction, gratitude comes from the heart. There can never be gratitude fatigue among us. Genuine gratitude does not create fatigue. It is energizing, life giving, joy-inspiring. The more you lean into it, the more it gives back to you. It creates a positive vibe among people. If someone is unable to feel or express gratitude, unable to name their blessings, their lives tend to be sad; whether they are rich or poor, it doesn't matter. Granted, we have all experienced times in our life when we didn't feel so grateful. My guess is those were difficult times in your life when you experienced sadness, depression or grief. Those mental states tend to wipe out our capacity to see and appreciate the goodness around us, but hopefully just for a limited time.

In the gospel reading Jesus heals ten men and only one comes back to thank him. He remarks that this man, a foreigner, was the only one who completed the circle of healing and was getting whole in body, mind and soul. There is not a story in the New Testament that highlights the importance of gratitude more than this one. Can we cultivate that attitude on a daily basis? Is your gratitude outweighing your complaints on a daily basis? If times are rough for you right now, can you pause a few times each day and say, "Thank you!" for something or someone, even little things? Gratitude is like a healing potion for the soul. May you find much of it on a daily basis! May you cultivate its presence in your soul! May it inspire your smile... May your cup overflow! (Psalm 23) May you live! Thank you, for listening! God is good all the time. All the time... (God is good!)

Amen.