

Gratitude for Spiritual Community

Final Week of the 5-Week Series, “40 Days of Gratitude”

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Rev. Richard Rogers

Rev. Richard Rogers: Do you ever get busy? Do you ever get so busy – day after day, week after week, year after year – that you’re just kind of doing what you do? And then you kinda pop your head up, and you just kind of look around, and you think: *“What have I really been doing?”* Has anyone else had that kind of experience? Where you just kind of pop your head up, and you’re like, *“This is what I do”*... You know, make the donuts... What was that commercial? *“Time to make the donuts!”* Is anyone old enough to remember that commercial?

Okay, well the guy just comes in at 5 o’clock and makes the donuts, makes the donuts, makes the donuts... forget it. There’s a point where you just kind of pop your head up, and you look around and say *“What have I done?”*

Over the last bit of time, I’ve been kind of looking at my own life. And I do this every so often, and I just pop my head up and have a look. And I’ve had a fantastic life and a fantastic career... and I just really try to define what have I done. Did I build churches? Yeah, I did that. Did I do a whole lot of Sunday and Wednesday talks? Yeah, I did a lot of those. Did I teach a lot of classes? Yes. But what did I really do? And I came to the realization that what I really did – or what I hoped to do and what I hope that I did best – was build spiritual community.

I’ve always loved building spiritual community. And if I look back over the course of my life, I really started in my twenties. One of my first jobs in my twenties was working with teens in teen ministry, and I loved it I had all of Southern California, and Las Vegas and Arizona. And I began working with teens. And the idea was: I wanted teens to have a place where they could experience a different kind of life, where they could feel loved and accepted, where they would have clear boundaries... and if they went over the line I would send them home, right? So some of the kids thought I was kind of a tough guy, but I wanted to create a place that was so safe that they could just feel unconditionally loved and accepted. And that was just so important to me.

The team ministry that I worked grew and, from there, I went into ministerial school and took over a church. And the whole thing was: I wanted to build community that made a difference in people's lives. Like, I wanted to be more than just the place where the people just went to church; I wanted to be the place where people feel connected and supported and loved and accepted.... where they could be the best version of themselves... where they could really be inspired to live greater lives.

And so, as we think about gratitude and move into the season of gratitude – the last one before we go into Thanksgiving next week – is, I want to give thanks for spiritual community. And I want to give thanks for this place as an incredible demonstration of spiritual community.

There seems to be kind of levels that people relate to this place as a spiritual community. For some people, this is the place where they “go,” and they say, *“I go to Unity.”* You know what I’m saying? They go – *“I go to Unity”* – and that’s their level; that’s their involvement and that’s their commitment. This is the place they go. You know, for all those people who want to come a few times or here and there... and this is the place – when they go to church; our doors are always wide open.

And then the next level are the people who say, *“This is my church.”* And something happens when you move from saying, *“This is where I go”* to *“This is my church.”* There’s a level of ownership that happens;

there's a level of commitment that happens; there's a level of involvement that happens. And when it becomes your church – "This is my church" – people take ownership of it. Man, people are committed to its welfare! You know, people have ideas of what their church should be like and do like and their values... And sometimes it's kind of problematic! Sometimes it's like, *"Why don't you just go back to turning it down, and make this the place you go instead of 'This becomes my church'!"*

[Congregation laughs]

Because what happens is – when people make it a commitment – they take ownership, and they'll clearly tell you when they don't like something that you're doing when it's their church, right?

But then there's a higher level of involvement, right? And there's people in this level of commitment that step into leadership or service, because not only is it their church, but they really want to make sure that their church is the best church it can be. And so, tonight, my question for you – 'cause I gotta start with a question! – my question for you is: Why did you come to church tonight? You couldn't have picked a worse time to come to church!

[Congregation laughs]

We had about three feet of rain today! The streets are flooded; it's dark; it's cold. But you came out of that environment, right? I mean, I was doubting my commitment to come to church tonight!

[Congregation laughs]

I'm taking a shower at my house, and it's pouring down rain, and I'm thinking *"There's gonna be two of us."* Right?

[Congregation laughs]

So I'm doubting my commitment to come to church. So I get it... but I really want you to ask yourself that question. Because sometimes, when we actually know why we're here, it's easier to get our needs met. It's easier for us to be about that.

So I made some notes ***[chuckles]*** – I actually do that occasionally for my talks!

[Congregation laughs]

I made some notes of why people come to church. So the first reason, historically, I think for many people is: it's the way we were raised. It's because we had to. Anybody raised in a family where you had to go to church? It just wasn't a choice; you just have to go to church. And that's still a part of so many of us: where we just feel like we have to; you know, the doors are open, we have to be there. We have to go to church.

The other group are people who come to church because they want to be connected to something bigger than themselves. They want to be connected to God; they want to be connected to a community. They want to be connected to something bigger than themselves. And I think that's so real for us: that idea of wanting to be connected to something bigger and greater.

The third reason I think people sometimes want to go to church is they want to be inspired. They just: they wanted to be lifted higher than their current way of thinking or feeling. Some of you know this week I was Florida in Naples, Florida, a church that I led for four years. And I led a workshop there Friday and all day Saturday, and it was called "Soul Breakthrough." And on Sunday, I wasn't speaking and I had to decide: Am I gonna go to church or am I gonna go to the beach?

[Congregation laughs]

It was a little bit of a dilemma, you know?

[Congregation laughs]

And, thank God, it was cold! Right? It was so cold! There was a cold front; you probably saw it on the news. There was a cold front down in Naples, Florida. And if you don't know anything about Naples, Florida, it is the end of the world! Beyond Naples is Key West and Cuba; like, it is the bottom of the fork. It was cold, and I went to church, and I was just so inspired. There it is! Thank you, God! I was just so inspired! And I know every time I've gone to church, there is at least one sentence that my soul needed to hear, right? It was just inspiring! It inspired me to see the bigger picture and live in a bigger way. So it's just like I'm sitting in the back row, and I'm listening, and then there it is. There is that one sentence that my soul came that morning to hear... and I needed it, right? I just absolutely needed it! And I was so inspired, and I left with so much love and connection. But I got inspired to be a better version of myself.

And I think the fourth reason that people come to church is that the church offers us an opportunity to be lifelong learners. I think there's so much to life, and if we stop learning at any point, I think we instantly then become in the process of dying. And, really, I hope and I pray that you can come to this church from the commitment of being a lifelong learner. That you will hear something, or you will understand Scripture differently, or you will think about a spiritual principle in a way that you've never thought of it before. Or you'll hear a quote. And you can really come to this church week after week after week and really practice being a lifelong learner, and we can keep growing and learning through the course of our entire lives.

The fifth reason I think people come to church is the whole idea of heaven and hell. You know, it's like going to church is the way that you cover your butts.

[Congregation laughs]

It's the way you either get in the door or you don't have to go, right? Until they find out about Unity, and then they're kind of disappointed, because they find out that we don't really believe heaven and hell is a place. Then they're like, "*Why go there?*" Right? "*I'm trying to make sure I don't go to that place!*" But people do: people go to church simply because they want to get into heaven and they don't want to go to hell.

Some people go to meet people and, you know, lots of people are here. Some people go to date the person in front of them or behind them, and some people go just because they don't want to be alone. Like, there is a connection that happens in ministry and church.

And some people go – number seven – the reason some people go to church is they really do want to advance their spiritual life. They want to enhance their spiritual life; they want to have a deeper more meaningful life; they want a deeper connection with God... And they want to advance their spiritual life.

Some people go to church – number eight – some people go because they want to feel loved. They feel like they haven't had a lot of love in their life, and they feel like, if they go to church, they will really hear about God's love for them, and they will really meet people in that community who will practice unconditional love. So then they get to be loved.

And then the last one is that, we sometimes need to be reminded that life was intended to be good. Right? Anybody every watch the news? Right? And what happens sometimes is: when we watch the news – or we get involved in all the stuff we get involved in – and when we hear of all the things going

on in the world, we just need a place to come and be reminded that life was intended to be good. And that, even when it isn't good – even when it's hard or painful – that's not God's will for us. That God's will for us is greater good. That's God's will for each and every one of us: is greater good and a greater life. To be more blessed than we've ever been before. And sometimes when you're in the struggles of life – and you're just really in the struggles of life – you really need to go somewhere and just hear for 20 minutes that life is going to be better. That there's a better day; that it's okay to hope.

Have you ever been in that place in your life where you don't know if you can hope any longer? Like, that place where you're just struggling day in and day out, and it's like, *"Do I really get to still hope? Do other intelligent people really still hope?"* Sometimes when you're living your life, hope is tough.

So we have all these reasons that we come to church, and maybe you have a reason that I haven't even thought of... that never would have occurred to me. But, you know, over and over again, that spiritual community literally makes a difference. A woman in Naples came up to me and said, *"You don't know me; I just started coming the last month or so that you were here, and I need to tell you a story."* And those always kind of freak me out, you know?

[Congregation laughs]

It's like: *"Oh, is this...? Did I do it right? Did I do it good? Did I meet your needs?"* And she's like *"No, I want you to hear this story. My partner was dying."* and I was like *"Oh?"* And she said, *"I'd only been coming to the church for a month, and I asked if you would come to visit her, and you did. And you came, and you made a world of difference to her. And even when I couldn't come on a Sunday, we would get the tapes and we would listen to it. And you gave us ministry, and you gave us God in the midst of a really hard time."*

And I was like, "Thank you God; thank you, God; thank you, God!" That sometimes we win, right? Sometimes we do the right thing; sometimes it actually makes a difference in someone's life, and they actually remember it.

So what I want to do tonight is I want to talk about what's in it for you. Why be involved in spiritual community? Why have a group of spiritual people that you walk with, year after year after year, and actually be a part of something that's important?

You know, one of the things I really wanted when I came here was: I wanted to be here a long time. I wanted to christen the babies, and I wanted to do their weddings, and I wanted to do the funeral. And I wanted to be a part of the community over a long period of time. Because, for me, there's something about longevity that matters. I mean, those of you who have been here for a long time, you've seen the twists and turns of my life, right? You all know it. It's been powerful when you see the way we all walk together, right? It's not like any one of us is perfect. You just know that you do it together, right? And, somehow, in doing it together, it makes it easier, right? That, week after week and month after month and year after year, you know where that person sits... And you know that they'll have a good word for you. Or you know that they'll inspire you. Or you know that makes a difference.

So the more I thought about it, the more I give thanks – literally every day -- for those spiritual relationships I have with people who have known me for a long time and love me anyway.

[Congregation laughs]

Do you all have a few people in your life like that? Who have known you for a long time, and they still find you adorable.

[Congregation laughs]

Like, I'm not sure why, right? But there's people who just love me anyways! And they've seen the way I've fallen down; they see the way I get back up; they see my disappointments and my frustrations, and they love me anyways.

So here: I want to give you one more list. And these are the reasons why I think spiritual relationship is necessary. I was going to go with helpful – I think spiritual relationships are helpful – but I think, in reality, they are necessary. I think it's necessary to have a group of people who see you created in the image and likeness of God. Because it's helpful, but it becomes necessary, because we forget that. Do you ever forget or stand in disagreement that you couldn't possibly be created in the image of God? Like, if God created me, God better be more than this, right?

[Congregation laughs]

So relationships – especially spiritual relationships – we can see each other from a higher point of view.

So, reason number one: relationships tend to call out the best in us. Now, it can also call out the worst in us... but it tends to call out the best in us. People that are in relationships that are in long-term relationships tend to be happier, to be healthier and they're more well-adjusted. This also applies to spiritual relationships. People who feel a deep sense of connection are happier, healthier and more well-adjusted. The research is really stunning about this! The people who have the ability to create more love – the expression of love, happier relationships – tend to be people that create more opportunities: create more money and have fun. That to me was staggering; that research was staggering. That people who have the highest quality relationships – by their own thinking... That if they're satisfied with their relationships, they tend to be more successful in other areas of their life, as well.

Relationships make us better people. How many of you have ever had a relationship that really demanded you be a better person than you wanted to be?

[Congregation laughs]

Right? Because relationships, over and over again, make us better people. Because, as a father, I 100% had to be a better person than I wanted to be. Like when one of those little dweebs was crying at the other end of the house, the 20-year-old version of me would let that go all night long. I would've just put a pillow on each ear and let that go all night long. Because I was in a relationship – because those little dweebs depended on me – I actually got out of bed. That is no small thing!

[Congregation laughs]

And over and over again, I did more than I thought I could... How many parents here did more for your kids than you ever thought you were capable of doing for anybody? Relationships actually make us better people! They actually call forth more from us, right?

And we take a relationship to a spiritual level. We realize that everyone is really a reflection of ourselves. That is so annoying. Isn't that annoying?

[Congregation laughs]

Like, you have someone in your life that you know is reflecting you, and you don't even want to look at them? Like, please, I don't want to see this person! I don't like this person! I'm a much better person than they are, right? But over and over again, it just takes us to higher ground.

Relationships heal us. In doing something nice for someone... You know, there's so much research now in gratitude. That, if you do something nice for somebody that really has no benefit to you whatsoever, your sense of inner well-being goes up for up to 30 days. I just think that is so amazing! So we just need to do 12 good things a year, and we'll have a higher level of happiness!

Most people have more fun with others, so relationships actually give us a playmate. Having someone who gets us deeply, validates us, and connects us to a level of warmth and love and happiness. And we know that actually doing things in relationship that we get more done.

Okay so, can you hear that I really believe in spiritual community? Here's the deal, here's your homework.

This holiday season, I want you to be looking for the person that you're called to be in a ministry of caring. Now, for many of us, the holidays are a wonderful time: family and friends, everything is going great. For some of us, the holidays are a really difficult time, where we're lonely. We struggle; we're frustrated. They're difficult. I would like us – as our homework for the holidays – so this is a bigger project; this is a month-and-a-half project. Maybe two months; you can get all the way into January. It'll be okay!

I want you to actually ask Spirit: who am I supposed to reach out to this season? And the ministry of caring maybe looks like you call them; you check in on them. Maybe you invite them to a meal or an event or bring them to church. Or bring them to the Grinch or bring them to Christmas Eve. Bring them to someplace that's special to you; take them to a movie, But I want you to really look for the person that you're called to reach out to this holiday season. It could be a neighbor; it could be somebody maybe you've lost connection with... But I want you to reach out to them. I want you to care about them. I want you to actually pick up the phone or knock on the door and reach out to them and make a difference in their lives.

And so, not only do I want you to have a ministry of presence... Do you know what a ministry of presence is? A ministry of presence is when you actually show up. It's a ministry of caring; it says, *"I care about you; I want good for you. I love you; I acknowledge you."* So it's actually showing up. Because when Jesus gave the disciples their biggest job... In Scripture, it's twice where he sent them out into the country and the world to heal. And what Jesus did is: he sent them out in two's. And I think that's very significant, because Jesus knew that if he sent them out alone, their self-doubt would get so great that they would quit. Have you ever quit on something that you really wanted? Your self-doubt just got the best of you, and you quit? But he sent them out two by two. And I believe the reason he sent them out two by two is so they would always have a hand to hold onto. That there's something in our world about having a hand to hold onto. That's what I call a ministry of caring.

So I want you to really look for the person in your life that Spirit is calling you to reach out to. And whether you literally hold their hand, or not, I want you to spiritually take their hand. I want you to give them a phone call. I want you to take them to a meal. I want you to take them to a movie. I want you to reach out to them, because we all need help in the holidays. And this isn't – you're not here to "save" them, you're not here to fix anything in their lives – but you can care. And that caring actually expands the work of this ministry. It is our community of care.

And so I want you to pick one person during this holiday, and I want you to care for them. I want you to love them. I want you to pray for them. I want you to accept them, whatever choices they've made – no matter how great or how crazy. I want you to just be there. And during the holidays, at least, I want you to just walk with them. Just care for them. And see – if you care for them – if you don't feel better in every area of your own life. Because what is the basic spiritual principle? As we give, so shall we receive!

So I want you to care. And I want you to see that, as you care, that caring comes back 10-, 100-, 1,000-fold. Because, honestly and truly, we actually do care. Even when we try not to care, we still care. And as we get conscious and intentional in our caring, everything in life works out better.

Will you pray with me?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to the activity of God. Today, we just walk in community. We walk in relationships. We walk with people who we care about – not because they're perfect or smarter or better or prettier; we walk with them just because we care. And caring makes all the difference in the world. So God: thank you, God, for all the people that walk with me. For all the people who love me and accept me just the way I am. The people who see my mistakes and my frailties and my shortcomings, and love me anyways. I give thanks for each and every one. I give thanks for the unbelievable, unconditional love that I've been blessed with in my life. And so it is. Amen.

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Thank you to volunteer Maddie Johnson for transcribing this message