HOW DO YOU GET TO CARNEGIE HALL?
Rev. Mary Barrett Speers

Sometimes in the Bible, the advice isn’t so much about God or about how to be faithful to God, or even how to follow Jesus, it’s just very practical advice on how to be human, and how to get along with other people—who are human, too. And of course, it’s still about God, because we are all made in the image of God, first of all, but also because it is our responsibility to make the most of it, to honor that image of God in ourselves as well as in others. Among other things, then, it can look a lot like plain old good manners: something as simple as accentuating the positive and saying thank you. And that’s the source of Paul’s advice here today.

About thirty years ago, long before I was ordained, I lived in the city and worked in the classical music business. I forget what had taken me to Lincoln Center that particular day, but I was standing at the bus stop outside Lincoln Center, when along came two young people, a boy and a girl, lugging heavy fiddle cases—if I remember correctly, a bass and a cello. They were about high school age, and they were all aglow from what had clearly been their Julliard audition for the Pre-College Division. You have to be pretty deep in the life of classical music even to qualify for an audition like that.

Anyway, there they were, breathless and toting their big fiddle cases, in a hurry, asking, “excuse me, how do we get to Carnegie Hall?” And then, at once, we all began to laugh.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? You know the answer; it isn’t even just a classical music joke any more. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? you practice. How do you get good at the piano, Rob? (Rob plays a Do-Sol scale.)


So, then, how do you get good at being thankful? You practice. That’s right: even if, depending on what’s going on in your life at the moment, it might be hard to be thankful.

So you start at the beginning. Rob just played the most basic, five-tone scale, the one you can play with one hand. So even if you can only count what you’re grateful for on the fingers of one hand, you’ve still made a start to counting your blessings. You’re on your way to…well, it’s kind of hokey, but some people call it an Attitude of Gratitude.

So, yes, the basic scale has five notes, for five fingers (including the thumb), and that’s the beginning of practicing. When you count anything, your blessings or anything else, you start with counting them off on your fingers. This sounds so dumb, you’re probably sitting there, thinking, “I can’t believe she’s talking about this.”

But the thing is, it works. The thing about a gratitude list is you don’t have to sit down and remember, right then and there, every last thing you’re grateful for. You just start making a list; and the things you come up with don’t have to be big things, either. One finger at a time (do, re, mi, fa, sol, fa, mi, re, do)—that’s five of them; think of five things, five little things, as silly as you like, that you are grateful for.

Let’s say, when you wake up in the morning, it’s not one of those mornings you feel grateful just to be alive. You know the kind of morning I mean. We all have them. But even then, there has still got to be something that you’re grateful for, even if it’s negative. For instance, you can wake up in the morning and ache all over, except that if you begin to pay attention, if you’ve been practicing this
counting of your blessings, you see, you can still say, “God, I am thankful that my left big toe doesn’t hurt this morning,” assuming that it doesn’t, of course. But there is usually something that’s at least okay, even in a sea of calamities. So you can start on a very basic level making a gratitude list—even if what you’re grateful for is just the absence of suffering, and only in one tiny area of your life.

I like to think of Paul sitting in prison, writing to the little congregation in Philippi, “I thank my God for you every day.” In prison, in Rome, he is thinking with fondness of this little band of Christians in that Roman military retirement community in Philippi, far away in Asia Minor. He is counting his blessings.

So that’s a start, but then when you get pretty good at the basics, you begin to want something more. (Rob plays an octave scale with one hand, and then two octaves, mirroring each other, bottom to top and top to bottom, with both hands.) Well! The first of those involved moving the hands and fingers in order to play an octave of eight notes, up and down, and then both hands mirroring each other, playing octaves in two different directions. So that’s getting into what is called exercises, and you do exercises to make your finger more able to do things quickly that your fingers don’t normally, naturally do. If you’re singing, you exercise your diaphragm and your vocal chords and your placement and all of that, and if you’re dancing or doing anything else physical it’s your whole body.

And in music, if you’re lucky, you get exercises written by Bach, so that your exercises aren’t just drudgery but actually musical and pleasurable—that’s why music helps you at the gym, and why I like partner dancing for exercise. But still, the point of exercises is that they teach your body to do things it might not naturally do, but that you want it to do because it can take you beyond the basics. And eventually, it all looks or sounds effortless and natural, and people say, “oh he’s so talented, how does he do that?” He practices.

Anyway, practicing isn’t always drudgery, because you get to dance, or play Bach. (Rob plays the first few measures of The Well-Tempered Clavier) and that is only the first of a whole cycle of pieces Bach wrote to teach his children to play the piano.

So, let’s say you’ve gotten pretty good at thinking of at least a few things you’re grateful are not happening to you at the moment. And let’s say you want to move on to something a bit more challenging. That’s when something like exercises comes in. You begin to practice reframing your negative gratitude…into positive. So instead of being grateful that your left big toe doesn’t hurt this morning, you say instead, as you count your blessings, “Thank you that my left foot feels so good today!”

So when it comes to gratitude, exercises help you to an attitude of gratitude even when you don’t really feel like it. And the thing is, gratitude makes you feel better. Over time, practicing it makes you live better, and if you live better, there will be more love and joy in your life.

When I stopped working in the classical music business, I went to work at the Jewish Guild for the Blind. I taught art, believe it or not, to older adults who had lost their vision later in life. “Oh, blind people have such a marvelous sense of touch!” people would say when I told them what I was doing; but, of course, if you haven’t had your whole lifetime to develop your other senses, and what is making you lose your vision is diabetes, which also affects the nerves in your fingers and toes, well, then that’s another story.

So anyway, when I started out in this work, one of the more experienced teachers told me, “Just remember: when you get older, you don’t necessary get better, but you do get more so. Nobody was handing out halos when these folks lost their vision.”

Well, I still haven’t learned that lesson as well as I’d like, but I did get the principle: *Think of the old person you want to be, and then start practicing, now.*
You can start practicing at any age; you don’t have to be young. In fact, if you aren’t young, you had better start right away, and you’ll probably have to practice harder, because you have less time for it to start feeling effortless and natural.

This matters especially if you’re getting forgetful—and that’s happening for most of us, every year. If we start practicing now the kind of person we want to be when we get old, then if we get to the point where we can’t remember what we intended to be, it’s okay because we are already in the habit of being that person. We can all think of people like that in our lives: even if they can’t remember what day it is, they still have good manners, because they practiced good manners all their lives.

And if I want to have good manners and be fun to be around when I get old, I had better not be a grouch, especially when I’ll need a lot of help. And being a thankful person makes you much more fun to be around, so I had better start practicing it now. I have to start exercising my gratitude muscle now, so that it’s there already, and it feels like a habit, when I need it later. So it feels instinctual and effortless so that people say “She’s always a joy to be around!” That’s the kind of old person I want to be when I grow up.

Paul is giving this same advice, and he’s writing to people not in the first flush of youth. Philippi was a retirement community for Roman military officers and their families. So after telling them how grateful he is for just knowing they are there, he says, “whatever is pure, whatever is gracious, whatever is honorable, think on those things.” He’s actually referring here to a list they would all have learned as children: the Virtues of ancient Greece: Prudence, Justice, Temperance (or Restraint), and Courage (or Fortitude).

In a church I used to serve, there were eight clerestory windows, one for each of the Virtues: these four, and then, from Paul himself, Faith, Hope, and Charity—the Seven Cardinal Virtues of Western Moral Philosophy. But since there were eight windows, there had to be an eighth, and what was it? I thought whoever chose it must have been inspired. It’s praise.

No matter what, we can praise God, and that’s the last point here. We remember, especially this time of year, when the days shorten; when all of the flowers go to sleep, even the chrysanthemums; and we give thanks for the harvest. When the days get shorter, and we are reminded of the saints who have gone to glory, and think of the shortness, and preciousness, of life itself.

We remember what Paul says, “Rejoice! and again, rejoice!” Even in the face of people saying, “But, but, but!” “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he says, “again I will say, rejoice!”

That’s one of the little five-tone scales we can always play. And as we get better at it, it’s one of the exercises we can always bring ourselves back to, because let’s face it, we can lose our agility, and we can always get more proficient.

The “rejoice” can be as simple as honoring someone’s memory, by putting into practice the things that we remember with such fondness about them. That’s the real way to honor someone’s memory: in a way that would please them most, and since we believe in the resurrection and eternal life, well then, it actually does please them, wherever they are, and in practicing doing things we most admire in other people, we are practicing being the kind of person we most want to be.

So we give thanks, not only on Thanksgiving, but all the time, because in practicing an attitude of gratitude we are practicing Thanksgiving. We might sit down at the Thanksgiving dinner and count our blessings as many families still do. We might resolve at the New Year to be the kind of person we want to become. But the way to become the person we want to be? The way to get to that Carnegie Hall in the sky? The grace of God through faith, of course…but then, in response to that grace, there is practice. And that’s pure Paul.
What are you thankful for? What is in your life only by the grace of God? What are we thankful for here at Setauket Presbyterian Church, and individually in our lives? Isn’t it…everything? Even for the things we aren’t so sure we’re grateful for…yet? Let’s practice Thanksgiving, let’s bring all of that in a basket to the Lord: the first fruits, singing and dancing a joyful Thanksgiving, no matter what, this time of year, and all the year long.

AMEN.

(Rob plays something really glorious and joyful for a few seconds as a musical AMEN)

And Amen to that, too! May it be so.