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*Vroom, Vroom!*

A sermon on Psalm 30, Matthew 15:32-38, and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

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Do you remember your first car? I bet you do. I bet if I asked, you could tell me all about it. I am not much of a car person myself, but I can tell you that my first car was a 1968 red Volkswagen bug, which my father had bought new back in 1968, the year before I was born. For a long time, that was my family's only car. By the time I started driving it in college in the late 80's and early 90's, that thing had been to Canada and back, more than once. My father had paid to have it repainted, and my mother had had to make denim slipcovers for the front seats, but by golly, that thing still ran. I filled it up with regular gasoline once a month, whether it needed it or not. Sometimes it took a few tries to get it up the hill when the roads in Kansas City were slick with ice and snow, but most of the time I managed to get where I needed to go.

In the early 1990's, after moving to Southern California, my next car was a Saturn. Not a fancy car, but I remember being thrilled to finally have a car with little luxuries like air conditioning, front wheel drive, power steering, FM radio, automatic transmission. The teenagers I worked with in Pasadena loved riding in my car because you had to turn the handle to lower the windows, and they had never seen that before.

After 14 years with the Saturn, I bought a Nissan Maxima, and that's when a little light finally switched on. For the first time, I owned a car with a 6-cylinder engine, and I began to have just the faintest glimmer of appreciation for the driving experience that a bit more powerful engine can provide. I had not known that merging onto the freeway could be so smooth! I happily drove that car until I moved to the Topeka area three years ago, and it just gave out one

day out on Highway 24 in front of the Cowboy Church, and I've been driving Rod's 2007 Lincoln ever since.

Now, as it turns out, our Director of Family Ministries, Ali Decker, knows more than a thing or two about cars. She graciously taught me the difference between stock and modified cars, and explained to me, the former VW bug driver, that there are old American cars where people actually remove the standard 6 cylinder engine and put in a big old HEMI. And so between Ali and a few other sources, I understand that whether it's a Hendricks-built motor in a Jimmie Johnson stock car or one of those top-fuel nitro dragsters that run out at Heartland Park, there are engines out there that make a Maxima seem like something Fred Flintstone would drive.

But whatever kind it is, it's clear that the engine is the heart of any car. That's where the power is. Leather seats and satellite radio and remote start are great, but without an engine, you're not going to get anywhere.

And the number one thing any car owner can do to take care of their engine, regardless of its horsepower or torque, is to change the oil. Any mechanic will tell you that the oil is the lifeblood of any car, unless you've made the switch to electric already. Engines are highly complex, with lots of fast moving parts. Oil provides the lubrication they need to keep from wearing out. Without it, those fast-moving parts create friction, which in turn creates heat, so oil prevents the engine from over-heating.

And since oil breaks down and turns into sludge over time, changing the oil regularly prevents it from corroding your engine. The name of the game is keeping your engine clean. If you faithfully change your oil, the engine doesn't have to work so hard, and your car will last longer. Failure to change your oil guarantees that your engine will not function as it should, and

it will not last, no matter how wonderful an engine it is. You don't even have to understand how an engine works, or why changing the oil matters—all that matters is that you do it. It's not a hard thing, but you have to keep up with it, and if you do, it really pays off.

If we look at a car as a symbol for our life, what is our oil?

I think it has to be gratitude. Our oil is gratitude. Gratitude keeps US functioning smoothly. It reduces friction, both within ourselves and in our relationships. And like changing the oil in your car, gratitude has got to be consistent.

There's been much scientific research on gratitude in recent years, and it seems that the practice of gratitude does at least seven things for us. ONE, it helps our physical health. People who practice gratitude experience fewer aches and pains, they feel healthier, and they are more likely to take better care of themselves. Their immune systems are stronger, and they have more energy. TWO, gratitude helps our emotional health by reducing toxic emotions like envy, frustration, resentment, and regret—it clears out the sludge of negativity, kind of like fresh oil clearing the sludge from an engine.

THREE, gratitude makes us kinder. When we are grateful, our empathy increases, and we are able to respond to other people calmly and kindly even when they are unkind to us. We're less aggressive, and less likely to retaliate when someone is behaving negatively towards us.

FOUR, grateful people sleep better, especially when they take the time to write down the things for which they are grateful before going to bed.

FIVE, gratitude improves our self-esteem. When we're grateful, we're not comparing ourselves unfavorably to others. Instead of being resentful about someone else's success, grateful people are able to genuinely appreciate others' accomplishments.

SIX, gratitude makes us mentally stronger. It's old news that gratitude reduces stress, but maybe not as well known that it may also help with trauma. For example, one study found that Vietnam Veterans with higher levels of gratitude had lower levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. SEVEN, gratitude opens up our world and connects us with people. People who say thank you create more opportunities to make new friends and widen their social circles.

I haven't done any scientific research on gratitude, but from personal observation, I would say that appreciation does wonders in families—I rarely get what I want by complaining, but if I appreciate what family members actually do instead of focusing on the things I think they should have done, somehow this is a lot more effective. It really is like oil in the way it reduces friction. If you're good about saying thank-you in your relationships, it's just like a well-oiled engine—you don't have work nearly so hard. And, I'm just gonna say—I think gratitude makes people better looking. Grateful people are attractive people! The positive energy they radiate just draws us to them. Maybe that's one of the reasons Jesus attracted so many crowds.

Gratitude, like an oil change, is a no brainer. And yet, sometimes we really struggle with it. We just forget to do it, or we get busy, and it just doesn't seem that urgent. Or sometimes we just feel overwhelmed by everything that's wrong, and saying thank you feels like trying to chew on an old tire.

Many centuries before either cars or scientific studies, there was scripture. There were psalms like Psalm 30, a song from someone who went from security and prosperity to not knowing if he would live to see another day, and overflows with thanks to God for healing and deliverance. He can't seem to stop! And there was Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, the oldest document in the New Testament, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."

There was the story of Jesus, feeding the crowd. Four thousand men, plus women and children. Seven loaves, and a few fish. That's all the disciples can scrape together. Do you ever stop to think what a wonderful, amazing image this is? Jesus having all those people sit down. And then, stopping to give thanks for those seven loaves and those few small fish. The need is this big (enormous). The resources are this big (tiny). Thank you, God. Thank you, God, for what we are and what we have right now in this moment.

When we celebrate communion, we remember how Jesus on the night before he died, took bread, and AFTER GIVING THANKS, he broke it and gave it to his disciples. Talk about giving thanks in all circumstances! Jesus knows that suffering and death is right around the corner, and there he is, giving thanks. Makes you wonder what role gratitude might have played in giving him the strength to face the cross.

I'd like to throw out a challenge to all of us this morning. Like a car needs oil, we need gratitude, and like oil needs to be changed, so does our thanks. Gratitude works best when it's fresh, when we keep finding new things to appreciate. So every day this week, give thanks to God for three new things. Write them down. Be as specific as possible. Don't just say, "Thank you, God, for my family," but "Thank you, God, that my daughter cared enough to call me tonight and tell me all about her trip," or, "Thank you for the way my busy brother stopped what he was doing and really listened to me when I came to him with a problem today." Over time, this trains your brain to get better and better at noticing positive things. Gratitude leads to more gratitude, which leads to all those benefits I mentioned earlier. And I don't think those benefits are just for individuals, either. If we intentionally practice gratitude as members of First Presbyterian Church, you better believe it helps the health of the church, gives us more energy,

makes us more attractive to our neighbors, and helps us as a church function at our very, very best, the way God designed us.

So please join me . . . writing down three different, very specific things for which we are thankful to God every day, starting today. I've already posted mine on the church's facebook page. I'll do this every day, so you can see what I've done and you can chime in too, if you like, or just keep yours private if you prefer. Then, let's check in with each other next week for some more gratitude and some more Car Talk. Let us pray:

God, thank you. Thank you for this beautiful summer morning, with the wildflowers in full bloom along the side of the road driving in to church this morning—purple, blue, white, yellow. Thank you for bringing Pat Yancey to us as our new Parish Associate, for his wisdom and experience and humor and so many gifts to share. Thank you for Benson Nzioka with us this morning, singing in a beautiful language we don't often get to hear. Thank you for all the blessings that cars provide to us, keeping us connected and helping us see far more of your glorious creation than we ever could without them. Thank you that there is always something to be thankful for even on our worst, toughest, most discouraging days. Help us become gratitude experts, both in our own lives and as part of this congregation. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.