

Grace and peace to you all from God – the holy one who gives thanks for all in their name – amen.

*“I give thanks to my God always for you...”*

This is how Saint Paul famously begins his letters to first century Christian communities. No matter what else he may need to share or teach or direct their community through, Paul begins with these prayerful words of gratitude.

Gratitude is a powerful positive force in not only our life but in our faith as well. Far from a trivial concept, it has a real impact on our health, wellbeing, and our foundational sense of belonging.

Gratitude fosters and deepens our relationships with those we care about. A Study at the University of New South Wales found when people expressed appreciation, others perceived that they could form trusting and supportive relationships with them, and tended to connect with gracious people in deeper ways. Which is why gratitude is truly good for our relationships and the communities which we are a part of.

However, gratitude is about so much more than simply positive feelings. It’s about creating a community where you choose to turn what little you have into abundance together. It invites other to remember the intangible gifts of care, support, and love we come to be surrounded and upheld by in this very community of faith. And above all, gratitude connects us back to God – the one whom gives us the ability to continue to give our thanks and praise.

Living a gracious life not only changes your perspective, it changes our life and our world as people of faith.

So today, I want to offer my own gratitude for a Christian community. Perhaps my own *“love your church moment”* to add to the amazing efforts of this campaign already at work. For a church named *Holy Spirit Lutheran* that graciously loved me long before I knew any of you ... or you me.

Growing up in Southern Alberta in the early 90s, I quickly learned by the way people talked and joked about (and even harmed people) in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community that being queer was not something to be proud of. It was certainly not something that was going to be celebrated by anyone I knew.

In fact, I remember thinking as young as 5, that if anyone ever found out that I was gay, I would have never been seen as good, worthy, or loveable by anyone ever again.

I felt this way because, when I was a youth, our cities and communities were still fighting over whether gay marriage should be legal in Canada. Which meant that often I had to hear what my friends, family, and church members thought of people like me – and it wasn’t pretty.

Back then it felt like the Christian world had decided that people like me shouldn't exist, and even though – from a very young age – I had always heard of God's love, I began to wonder if I'd ever be fully loved and included in a church for who I was.

Following the 2011 ELCIC vote on human sexuality – which would allow me to openly attend seminary as a queerly beloved child of God – I sent in my application to pursue a Masters of Divinity degree.

When I finally arrived at the seminary in the fall of 2012, I was the only student in my first-year class.

I had picked up my life from Lethbridge, Alberta and moved to Saskatoon – where, for one week that winter, it was colder than Mars.

I didn't have any family or community in the area, and while I had pockets of support at school, the seminary was not yet the safe place I had dreamed it might have been for a queer student.

So, when I returned for the winter semester, I found – to my great joy – that I had received a scholarship.

To be honest, I was in desperate need of the money, and had been surviving on ramen for longer than I care to admit. In the letter of my scholarship, I saw that it came from *Holy Spirit Lutheran Church – a welcoming Christ centered community*. And when I went to your website to find your address, I found the welcome statement we have all come to hold so dear:

*All are welcome in this church, and all means all.*

*You are welcome regardless of your country of origin or ancestry.*

*You are welcome regardless of whether you are one day, 10 years, or 100 years old; whether you are male, female or transgender; whether you are a new or lifelong Christian, of another faith, agnostic, atheist, or have never set foot in a place of worship.*

*All are welcome here.*

*You are welcome regardless of whether you are single, married, divorced, separated, widowed or partnered, whether you are straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual; whether you are politically active, apolitical or indifferent; whether you own your home, rent, live with your parents, or are houseless; whether you are mentally, physically, or not noticeably challenged or gifted.*

*All are welcome here.*

*This church is committed to being a loving and welcoming Christ-centered community of faith. Therefore, in faithfulness to the Gospel, in reflection of our Lutheran heritage, and in*

*honour of our shared baptismal covenant, we promise to seek ways to enter into shared ministry with all who would seek God here.*

It was then I heard your story as a community of faith – a community who had been through hard times, experiencing splits and schism, but had carried on in gratitude for all you had been given. Responding to the prophetic call of God to work to welcome, affirm, and celebrate those who found themselves at the margins of our community and world. The scholarship I received was part of that – missional outreach for the first “out” queer student to apply for an MDiv at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon.

I wish I could remember what I had written to you all in my thank-you card, but knowing you now, I think it would sound similar to Saint Paul’s words to the Corinthians today – expressing gratitude for you who have gone before and with me; you who have kept the faith alive, and truly welcomed all in Christ’s name.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes an important distinction that, alone, we do not possess the gifts we need for a life of faith and ministry. We need the unique gifts, talents, abilities, growing edges, backgrounds and resources of others to fully see and realize what it means to be the full body of Christ.

And, Holy Spirit, you have a special and important role to play not only within this church – which was planted 59 years ago in this very neighborhood – but also within our wider synod, church, and world, as so many have not yet found a place where all are welcomed just as they are.

That isn’t to say we won’t or don’t mess up from time to time. But we continue to strive as people of faith to provide a safe, affirming, gracious, and welcoming space for all who seek God and community, to work for justice and hope, and to respond to a world in need.

I’m excited to be a part of a church that doesn’t simply welcome people on its sign, but rather one that celebrates each and every one of us for who we were fearfully and wonderfully created to be as people of God!

As a Queer Lutheran Pastor, I am honored to be able to share God’s gratitude for all they have made through my ministry with and among you – reminding members of our Church community and those beyond our doors that their life and gifts are a needed and an important part of God’s story with us all.

At Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, I have found a whole community of supportive and loving people. People who have taken the time to listen to my story, as well as others at the margins of our church and world. A community who has worked together to hold these people and their lives carefully in grace, all the while affirming that we are all beloved and gifted child of God and that nothing could ever change that.

It's my hope that you, too, have had a chance to experience the expansive love, affirmation, and gratitude of God through this community of faith.

Whether it is your first day here, or whether you lost track of that long ago.

Whether your go to worship place is coloring at the back of the sanctuary or warming the front pew from your couch at home.

Whether you have this thing called faith all figured out, or you're not sure if faith describes where you are at today.

You have been called to this community with your unique giftings, abilities, growing edges, and passions – just as you are – because without you our church wouldn't be the same.

And it's my prayer for us at Holy Spirit that we would continue to prepare the way for those yet-to-come – that our church and wider community would truly be a space where we are grateful that all are welcome.

May this be so among us.

Amen.