Who do you think you are? What kind of person are you? When you are faced with challenges, do you see possibilities and tell yourself, “This is an opportunity to make things better,” or do you see obstacles and tell yourself, “This can’t be done; it is too hard and complicated”?

If you think positively, you likely see yourself as strong and able to handle life’s challenges. You believe you can shape your future and make a real difference in your life and the world. You are ready to work hard and stay steady, even when things get tough. Instead of giving up when you face problems, you see them as chances to grow and learn. Even when times are hard, you find reasons to be hopeful, focusing on the good that can come out of a situation. Hope is what keeps you going.

On the other hand, if you tend to think negatively, you might feel like life just happens to you and you can’t change it. You might doubt whether you can get past difficult times. When you run into problems, you might think, “This is too much; I can’t handle it,” and you focus more on what could go wrong instead of what could go right. This way of thinking can trap you in a cycle of negativity, where expecting the worst makes it hard to see the good things that could happen.

So, let me ask again: Who are you? Do you find yourself leaning towards optimism and seeing challenges as stepping stones, or do you often feel overwhelmed and defeated by obstacles?

Today’s message is titled “Grateful Hearts, Brave Spirit.” The idea is that when we nurture a grateful heart, we develop a positive mindset, too. When that happens, we gain a sense of hope that gives us the courage to confidently face even the most daunting challenges in life.

There is a story in the Bible that speaks to this in insightful ways. In the book of Numbers, chapter 13, we read about twelve spies sent by Moses to explore the land of Canaan, a land promised by God to the Israelites. Here is the reading from selected verses (1-3, 17-21, 26-33),

“The Lord said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.” So at the Lord’s command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

So they went up and explored the land… They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.””

This Scripture describes a pivotal moment in the story of the Israelites. They had left Egypt and the next step was to take the land God had promised them where they would be established as a nation. For this, Moses, following God’s command, sent twelve spies to explore the land to assess it and its inhabitants. After forty days, the spies returned with reports and samples of the land’s produce. The land was indeed fruitful. However, ten of the twelve spies focused on the challenges rather than the opportunities. They reported that the inhabitants we strong and their cities fortified and large. They even mentioned seeing giants, which amplified their fear. So they “spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.”

Their pessimism quickly became contagious (as it often is), causing fear and despair among the Israelites. In Numbers 14, this fear escalated into a crisis of faith and leadership. The people started to grumble against Moses and Aaron. Their fear and lack of faith led them to express a desire to return to Egypt, where they had been slaves, rather than face the challenges in front of them.

What does this mean? The reaction of the twelve spies is an example of how a pessimistic perspective can lead to defeatism, spreading quickly in the community. Despite the miracles they had witnessed, including the Exodus from Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites allowed fear to overshadow their faith. They forgot the promises of God and saw their challenges as insurmountable. This is the generation of Israelites who were condemned to wander the desert for 40 years before a new generation was born with a new and positive mindset.

But in the midst of such pessimism and defeatism, there is a glimpse of hope. There is Joshua and Caleb. These two spies are the ones who brought back a positive report and tried to encourage the people. They spoke of the land’s goodness and urged the Israelites to trust in God, assuring them they could overcome the challenges. Their optimism was not mere wishful thinking but deeply rooted in their faith in God. Their faith was so deep that it instilled in them a profound sense of gratitude. This gratitude was not for the absence of challenges but for the presence of God’s promise. They had witnessed God’s miracles and deliverance in the past, so they believed God would do it again.

Consequently, their grateful hearts became the foundation of their brave spirits. While the other spies saw giants and fortified cities and were overcome by fear, Joshua and Caleb saw the same giants and cities but felt empowered. Their gratitude for God’s promises and past faithfulness gave them a different vision - one where obstacles became opportunities for God’s power to manifest. This vision, rooted in a grateful heart, gave them courage and confidence.

What does this mean to us? The story of Joshua and Caleb teaches us that faith does more than just sustain us; it transforms our outlook. When we view life through the lens of faith, we cultivate grateful hearts, which in turn embolden our spirits. This gratitude is not for a trouble-free life but for the presence and promises of God even in the midst of troubles.

What do gratitude and bravery look like in the midst of challenges and adverse conditions, you may ask? Let me tell you about one of our church members who recently was in a terrible motorcycle accident. I am talking about Troy McMillen. His accident was so bad that more than once, we thought he was not going to make it. But God! He is a miracle in more than one way. He has had so many surgeries and has so much steel in his body (screws, rods, etc.) that he jokes saying he is becoming Robocop. But in visiting with him, he has shared with me how grateful he is for being alive. He speaks with determination and vision about what is ahead. His recovery will take months, but he has found his faith in new ways in such a manner that fills him with confidence and hope despite the hardship and concerns he deals with.

Going back to the questions I asked at the beginning: “Who do you think you are? What kind of person are you?” The ten spies who feared and grumbled, or Joshua and Caleb? Which one would you want to try to be?

In our daily lives, we are often confronted with situations that test our resilience and faith, moments when we are tempted to fear and become resentful. However, these moments, whether they are as significant as a life-altering accident like Troy’s or as routine as daily stresses and anxieties in our jobs or with our family and friends, provide us with opportunities to practice the same kind of faith and optimism exhibited by Joshua, Caleb, and Troy.

I know and understand how dealing with health issues, professional setbacks, broken relationships, and more can be so overwhelming that we may lose sight of the blessings we have. But we have the power of God in us that turns sorrow into joy, darkness into light, and death into life if we believe and act on it.

My friends, nurturing a grateful heart through faith is the key to transforming challenges into opportunities. Gratitude is what shifts our focus from what is lacking to what is abundant in God’s creation. It is about recognizing the small miracles in everyday life, the strength we gain from past challenges, and the potential that lies in the future. This is what positive thinking in Christian life looks like. Then, this gratitude becomes the wellspring of our bravery, giving us the confidence to face difficulties not as victims but as active participants in God’s plan.

Here is the invitation and good news: Let us strive to nurture a faith that breeds gratitude. Let this gratitude not be silent but be the force that drives our bravery and confidence. Like Joshua and Caleb, let us face our giants, not with fear, but with hearts full of thanksgiving and spirits emboldened by faith. This is the essence of living with grateful hearts and brave spirits, a life where faith turns every challenge into an opportunity for growth and every obstacle into a platform for God’s power to be displayed. Amen.