



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5012**

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### WELCOME

**Lydia Talbot:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today is John Killinger. He’s going to talk to us about the one thing he knows will lift our hearts whenever we’re in despair – and that’s to remember how much we have to be thankful for.

**Lydia Talbot:** We’ll also welcome back Jason Byassee, who reflects on the simple thankfulness he has discovered in his young children.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And we begin with the story of a man who, as a contented agnostic, became unexpectedly overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence as he stood in the middle of a frozen Minnesota lake. John Lionberger left a longtime business career to attend seminary, and now he leads others on wilderness excursions to help them reconnect with God. Let’s watch.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**John Lionberger:** The first time I realized that, truly, I was probably in the wrong business for me was when I took a client to lunch and I recognized that what I really cared about was this client’s life and not about their business. I had a good career and had been quite successful, but I was a miserable man and I didn’t want to be miserable like that any more. I wouldn’t counsel suffering but there is a value to it. I was embarrassed for people who said they needed God. I was a pretty confirmed atheist/agnostic for a long time. I saw no need for church. I had no need for God. It just was not important in my life. I was doing just fine on my own, thank you very much. If you’re familiar with Simon and Garfunkel’s song about “I’m a rock, I’m an island,” that was my theme song.

And then I went through this mid-life crisis. My wonderful wife called Outward Bound and said, “What is the hardest trip you have?” And they said, “Oh well, it’s dog sledding in the middle...at the beginning of February. It’s about 40 below at night and it’s 10 below during the day, maybe. And it’s really, really hard.” And my wife said, “Sign him up!” I went on this dog sled trip in northern Minnesota as an agnostic. I walked into the woods for the adventure as an agnostic and I walked out of those woods knowing that I had been touched by God in a way that was undeniable. Religions that have used the wilderness as a touchstone: the Jewish tradition is 40 years in the desert; in the Christian tradition there are the Desert Fathers and Mothers; Buddhists

have wilderness, forests generally, and almost always in the mountains because that's where the Buddha found Nirvana. Now I take people into the wilderness to find the incredible sense of purity and sense of connection and the sense of simplicity and the sense of spirituality.

What I really love about being out here is it slows you down. It's calming and it's very centering and it just makes you feel peaceful. When you paddle on a river, you realize that there is more to life than just simply hurrying from appointment to appointment or spending time in front of this computer screen. I feel very blessed to be able to do this work and to watch what happens to people when they have those moments of "oh, my God!"

[Speaking to group] So just let's throw the forum open to you. What has happened for you on this trip?

[Men in group] We've all been raised and trained with the cell phones and the computers and we're continually plugged in. Text messaging and feeling that we always need to be in touch with the immediacy of information. And all of a sudden, to unplug from all of that is an amazing experience.

## INTRODUCTION

**Lydia Talbot:** John Lionberger is the founder of "Renewal in the Wilderness" which takes people from all faith traditions on wilderness journeys to spend extraordinary time with God. For more information, you can visit our web site at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org).

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. John Killinger has packed more accomplishments into his seven decades than most of us could in two lifetimes. He's been a pastor, a teacher, a writer, a storyteller, and preacher. From Harvard University to the Little Stone Church on Mackinac Island, John has proclaimed good news wherever he goes. And for those who have never heard him in person, there are 70 books to his name. We met John in 1989 and he's been back on "30 Good Minutes" every year since. It's always a great honor to welcome John Killinger to the program. Welcome, John.

## MESSAGE

**John Killinger:** Thank you very much, Lydia. It's a pleasure to be here.

I was really feeling low last summer. Some people think ministers don't have problems, but we do. Sometimes big ones. I was missing one of our sons, who is estranged from us. I missed his little daughters especially — our only grandchildren. My wife and I were thinking about moving, and I was already feeling uprooted from a home I have loved. I was having trouble placing a couple of books I wanted to get published. It didn't matter that I had others coming out; these were ones I especially wanted to see in print. One of our dear friends, a young girl of sixteen, was having life-threatening surgery. Another friend reported that her medication was no longer working and she was losing her battle with cancer. One morning I didn't want to get out of bed. It all seemed too much.

Then I thought about how my life has been blessed. My wife and I had our health. We still had one son who loved us and wanted to be with us. We had all the money we needed. We had a

comfortable home. We loved the taste of our food, and a good cup of coffee at breakfast. How ungrateful I am, I thought. I have so much more than nine-tenths of the other people in the world. What kind of ingrate am I, that I'm feeling depressed by these things? I began to think about all the things I should be grateful for—and immediately began to feel better!

I remembered St. Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." And then he said, "Do not quench the Spirit." I wondered if somehow the two things were related— giving thanks and not quenching the Spirit. Does the sense of God's Spirit in us come from giving thanks? I could believe it, because the minute I began being grateful again, my spirit perked up.

You know, it's almost impossible to be grateful for everything in our lives and to feel blue and depressed at the same time. Try it, and you'll see for yourself You can't do both at the same time. There is always something to feel grateful for.

One of my favorite books for years has been Sabina Wurmbrand's story, "The Pastor's Wife." Sabina's husband Richard was a Christian pastor in Rumania. When the Russians came after World War Two, they put him in prison for believing in God and preaching his faith. Sabina was imprisoned too, and their young son had to be cared for by friends.

One day, as the women prisoners were marched along the road, from the factory where they performed forced labor, back to their bleak, comfortless dormitory, a friend of Sabina's surreptitiously plucked two raspberries growing beside the road, and carried them along in the palm of her hand. When they got back to the dormitory, she opened her hand, showed them to Sabina, and gave her one of them. They were so delighted with those two lonely, partially crushed little raspberries because they didn't have anything else.

I think of that sometimes when I feel like complaining because I don't like what I'm eating or I'm tired of wearing the clothes I've been wearing or can't find a TV program I want to watch. Two lonely, little raspberries. And I feel like a dog if I can't find gratitude in my heart.

The world is an arena for gratitude. There is always so much around us for which to give thanks. It is like what our Buddhist friends call "awareness"— merely being present to the richness of all things, to the stupendous wealth of being alive and being able to see and hear and feel and taste things. If we were only truly aware, truly sensitive to everything, it would blow all our fuses in an instant. We couldn't bear the overwhelming number of gifts.

Do you remember a book several years ago by an American Indian named William Least Heat Moon—it's kind of a tongue twister, isn't it? The book was called "Blue Highways." Heat Moon had just lost his job as an English professor and didn't have anything better to do, so he got in his old van that he had named Ghost Dancing and drove all over the country, following the highways marked in blue on the map—the back roads, never the interstate highways. And he wrote about the richness of what he encountered.

Even in the desert of West Texas, he found things to celebrate. One day he drove out there just to look and listen and learn what was there. Everybody said there was nothing out there, but he knew better. And he made a list of the things he found there. There were thirty items on his list.

A mockingbird. A mourning dove. Gray flies. A blue bumblebee. Black ants, orange ants, orange-and-black ants (what's been going on? he asked). An opossum skull. Some cactus. A jackrabbit (he didn't see it, but he could see where it had been gnawing on the cactus). Some mesquite plants. The earth, and the sky, and the wind. Always the wind, he said. And some people said there was nothing out there!

Awareness: being present to the world around us. Feeling it, seeing it, listening to it, caring about it. Being grateful for it. It really can heal your spirit, can't it? It's something that we're just alive, and, whether we're artists or poets or only ordinary folks, we can enjoy everything and give thanks for it.

In the end, when we die, maybe we'll be judged not by what we accomplished during our lifetimes—the jobs we held, the music or the books we wrote, the recipes we invented, and all that—but by how thankful we were to have lived. Somehow, as I grow older, that seems important to me. I don't want to die as one who wasn't grateful, who didn't appreciate everything while he had it.

Above all, I'm grateful for Christ and what he taught us about living. Aren't you? It has made a difference in my life.

I had a nice long conversation on the telephone recently with a minister friend of mine named Barry Howard. Barry was once one of my students. He's now a pastor in Pensacola, Florida. He was telling me that he's writing a book about his experiences with people who were dying. He's going to call it "Pushing Up Daisies." He may change that now there's a television program something very near that. He told me one of the stories he wants to put in this book. It's about a man in his late seventies who had been in the hospital several days awaiting death. In the middle of the night, Barry's phone rang. It was the man's wife. They had just called her from the hospital to say that the end was near. Would he please come by and pick her up and go with her?

In the hospital room, her son and daughter were already by the bedside. Her husband lay there, his eyes shut and an oxygen mask on his face. Once or twice, he seemed to be struggling with the mask, and his son reached out and straightened it and moved his hand away. The third or fourth time, Barry said, "Wait a minute. Maybe he wants it off so he can say something."

He did want to say something. "Hold my hand," he murmured huskily to his wife. She took his hand and stood by the bed. The mask was restored, and this time he lay quietly, content to be holding his wife's hand. Then, very gently and soothingly, the wife began to sing. It was an old hymn called "Victory in Jesus." Before she had sung very much, her daughter joined in and sang alto. And then the son, who had been crying, began to sing tenor. When they finished that song, they sang "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." And when they finished that, they began singing "Amazing Grace."

They were on the last verse of "Amazing Grace"—"when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun"—when the life line on the bedside monitor went flat and the man was gone. It was an amazing experience, said Barry. When they entered the room, there had been pain and suffering and tension. But now, when the man died to the strains of those familiar old

hymns, there was joy and composure and even thanksgiving. Everything was good—life, death, everything.

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." And all we can say is, "Thanks be to God for the unspeakable gift of his son Jesus Christ. Amen."

### CONVERSATION

**Daniel Pawlus:** If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from John Killinger, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now, let's talk with John Killinger. John, we're always grateful to have you on the program. Thank you for being with us again this year.

**John Killinger:** My pleasure.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I'd love to begin by asking you what role gratitude has played in your marriage. Your lovely wife is here with us today, I know. I've gotten to meet her for the first time. Fifty-three years, you told me?

**John Killinger:** Fifty-five. Yes. She was a child!

**Daniel Pawlus:** I guess so! Certainly gratitude has played a big part in those years together.

**John Killinger:** Oh, yes. And it buoys the spirit to wake up in the morning and look over at somebody you love that much and think how grateful you are to be married to that person. What ever dreams you may have had that were not pleasant, sometimes we can't control our dreams, but you wake up and it puts a nice touch on the day just started to be thankful for the person you're married to.

**Lydia Talbot:** There are no words to convey that kind of intimacy, are there?

**John Killinger:** The intimacy and the sense of well-being, that you've been gifted, that God has given you something. It's another thing that you've been given among all the things that we've been given. And it makes you feel so sad for people whose lives are so impoverished by a lack of thankfulness that they don't feel that way.

**Lydia Talbot:** John, you began your message earlier by saying the words, "I'm feeling so low." And you referenced your sadness over missing your estranged son, Krister. Can you talk about that?

**John Killinger:** We've done very little else for three years, I guess. What would you like me to talk about?

**Lydia Talbot:** Just how are you able to...where can you put that? I mean the pain.

**John Killinger:** Well, it's very difficult. The pain is a very real pain and it's something you never get away from. We try to think, well, it's like our children died in a car crash and we can't

reach them any more. We can't talk to them. We think about people who have lost their children this way. Then we're reminded by something, you know, well, that our children aren't really dead, they are still out there. It's awful to be separated from them. You don't know what's going on in their hearts and minds. Last time we saw our son I thought he was having a nervous breakdown. My wife thought he had a brain tumor because he was so unlike the person we had known. But then you look at the world and all the problems people have. You think about all of the young men and women who are coming back from Iraq these days with their limbs gone or their minds not right, afflicted by post-traumatic syndrome and that sort of thing all the time. You realize that your problem is very small in the light of all the others and that it's just part of life, that life is a mixed blessing. There are things that make us happy and there are things that make sad, but still life is to be given thanks for. It's a beautiful thing just to be aware of it as life.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I was going to say, you called out in your message, as well, modeling gratitude to a certain extent. You're a man of many accomplishments obviously, but you're appreciating this idea of wanting to be remembered as someone who is grateful. And it reminds me of my grandmother. That was one of her greatest gifts to me and to all of us. I always felt this deep sense of gratitude for the time that she had with us. And it was a legacy that she left behind. Did you want to talk any more about how you're coming to that place? You're certainly still very active. We want to talk about your new book here momentarily.

**John Killinger:** Well, it's basically, I think, a learned skill in some ways. Some people are naturally grateful. I've known a few. But I think, by and large, we have to become more and more conscious of where we are, where life is around us, and how we ought to be grateful for it. When we have become more conscious then we move more and more into the spiritual realm. I think this is in nuns and people who have sequestered themselves from ordinary life, this is a part of their task. They are there to learn to be thankful all the time.

**Lydia Talbot:** Thankfulness. How does affirmation fit into this, John? It reminds me of a wonderful Church of Christ pastor, Jim Kidd, who often talked about three ways of looking at the "givenness" of life: the hand wringers, self-pity; the stoics; and the people of faith who just put a big "Y-E-S," in capital letters, over all the good, all the bad, the whole kit and caboodle. So how is affirmation a part of this gratitude process?

**John Killinger:** You're affirming life when thankful for things. You're affirming even the evil and the unhappiness in your life. Our estrangement problem, we have to affirm that. Yes, that's the way it is but we're alive, we're here. Who knows? Maybe things will change someday. We don't live expecting it to. Everybody says, "You know, he'll come back." And perhaps he will. But as another friend, who has had a similar experience, says, "What about all the missed birthdays and Christmases and happy times we would have had?" That's very sad but still in the end, no matter how beaten down we are, how ill we are, to be able to affirm it and to say, "Thanks, God, for letting me live." It's wonderful.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We've got a little over a minute left. We want to talk about your new book, John, "The Changing Shape of Our Salvation." This is relevant to our topic today because it's talking about appreciation in this life rather than the afterlife. Do you want to tell us about it a little bit?

**John Killinger:** Well, I think the most unique thing about the book is it's a history of salvation, what the Jews thought about it and what the early Christians and the Medieval Christians and the Reformation Christians thought about it. But basically the hook in it, I think, comes a little bit later. We talk about what people today think. And I was quite surprised to learn in polling pastors, particularly ministers, across the country, how many of them see salvation now more in terms of this life and the fulfillment of one's spirit in here and they trust God for what will come afterwards. They don't disbelieve in a life to come but they believe that finding a sensitive way to live and an affirming way to live in this life is more important.

**Lydia Talbot:** Not a preoccupation with getting to heaven.

**John Killinger:** Exactly! That's right.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And the book beautifully addresses that. We're looking forward to reading it. Again, it's always wonderful to have you here. Thank you for sharing with us today.

**John Killinger:** My pleasure. Thank you, Daniel and Lydia.

#### INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** And now, Jason Byassee, Associate Editor of the Christian Century, has this final thought on gratitude.

#### REFLECTION

**Jason Byassee:** My 3 and 4-year-old sons are just learning to pray. As we ask God to bless mommy, daddy, friends and enemies, they'll throw in some additional blessings: "God bless stuffed animal. God bless toothbrush. And God bless Charlie Brown."

So much of parenting is sheer difficulty. Getting the kids to bed on time. Getting them potty trained in time for preschool. Getting them to get along with their friends and each other and not fight. The list goes on. But they're thankful, even for toothbrush and Charlie Brown. And parents, frenzied and harried as we are, are told by our elders to cherish these moments—they pass too quickly, and the children are gone. No one has ever looked back on their life and said, "You know what, I was entirely too thankful!" We could all stand to be more grateful. Even for stuffed animal.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

**Daniel Pawlus:** Thank you, Jason. And our thanks again to John Killinger, John Lionberger, and you for joining us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I'm Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," have a wonderful week ahead and may your heart be open to God.