

## *Fueled by Gratitude*

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Ancient Witness: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

You all know the story:

The Pilgrims come to this new land to escape religious persecution - so they could worship God the way that they feel led to do so. After a cold and bitter winter came the next fall harvest, and those who managed to survive were wholeheartedly thankful. Half of those brave settlers had died. The rest of them had scarcely eked out an existence, holding on desperately despite starvation and sickness and cold.

William Bradford, one of their leaders, looked for the time when their children would remember:

*Our fathers [and mothers] were English [people] who came over this great ocean and were ready to perish in the wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and [God] heard their voice and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord because [God] is good and [God's] mercies endure forever.*

So you see, the Pilgrims thanked God wholeheartedly and hoped their descendants would also.

But think about it. These folks just went through a disaster that almost wiped them out, and someone gets this bright idea - "Hey, let's have a special day of thanks!" Not a memorial day. Not a day of lament. Not a day of petition, but a day of thanks! What a crazy idea.

Reminds me of that proverbial lost and found ad: "Lost: male dog, neutered, has one eye, mangled left ear, paralyzed hind leg, crooked tail. Answers to the name, 'Lucky.'"

Those were different times, and they were different folks. If our Pilgrim fathers and mothers had calculated their gratitude on the basis of a profit and loss statement, there would never have been a Thanksgiving Day. The Pilgrims were quite pitifully in the red. They were poor, had not even a good harvest. They were not in good health - half of them had died. They had no security of any kind. They were not safe from their enemies - even the cemetery was disguised lest it betray their weakness. Yet they were the very ones who founded Thanksgiving Day!

The Pilgrims saw *life itself* as a tremendous gift from God, a gift, which is often taken for granted. If one thing can be said about our Pilgrim ancestors, they had the ability to see God's goodness and grace.

This reminds me of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians where he wrote, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Today I ask, “*How* does one give thanks in all circumstances? *How* does one live the life of gratitude?” It’s easy to be grateful when big or wonderful things are happening, but what about the remaining 99%?

This is something that all the great spiritual giants had in common. They lived out of a deep sense of gratitude. All of the great spiritual people are profoundly grateful. Ronald Rolheiser wrote, “Sanctity has to do with gratitude. To be a saint is to be fueled by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less.” (*The Holy Longing*) Want to be a saint? Be “fueled by gratitude.”

Today is one of the few times that you’ll hear me talk about stewardship – giving to the church. And as important as our budget is, and we have some very important things we want to accomplish with it, a spiritual community is concerned more with the *motivation* of the giver than the gift.

Our giving best flows from a grateful state of mind. Like the early followers of Jesus, we, too, can share “with glad and generous hearts.” (Acts 2:46) I’d like to view our giving not as an exchange or transaction or duty, but as an expression of a deep gratitude and awareness, the same awareness we want to foster within and among ourselves and others. I’m focusing on the *quality*, not necessarily the quantity, of our giving.

Living a life “fueled by gratitude” is a radical and extremely challenging thing! Perhaps no one fully achieves it. It’s to live in a state of wonder and amazement every day, every minute, while avoiding the belief that we need or deserve different circumstances. True gratitude is a deep satisfaction with *life just as it is*, even when it doesn’t meet our hopes and expectations. I’m talking about *practicing unconditional gratitude*.

Author, Timothy Miller, wrote that living gratefully is possible, but you’ve got to work hard at it. It doesn’t come naturally to adults. It’s a skill. He describes gratitude as “the intention to count your blessings every day, every minute, while avoiding, whenever possible, the belief that you need or deserve different circumstances.” But we are given this belief at a very young age when we are taught to achieve, to strive and to accumulate. We’re a problem solving species. That’s our thing. We fix; we improve things.

So, here is my definition of gratitude: *to live without expectation*.

How simple, and yet, incredibly difficult!

Gratitude is not so much a feeling or a virtue or an experience, as it is an *attitude toward life*. It means to follow the advice of Alice Walker’s poem: “Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise.”

But this is very, very difficult because we learn how to anticipate things and to focus our attention elsewhere. We are conditioned to expect that only good things should happen to us.

Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast, writes that surprise is the seed of gratefulness, which in turn leads to healthy people in a healthy society:

*Once we stop taking things for granted, our own bodies become some of the most surprising things of all. It never ceases to amaze me that my body both produces and destroys 15 million red blood cells every second. Fifteen million! That’s nearly twice the census figure for New York City. I am told that the blood vessels in my body, if lines*

*up end to end, would reach around the world. Yet my heart needs only one minute to pump my blood through this filigree network and back again. It has been doing so, minute by minute, day by day, for the past 75 years and still keeps pumping away at 100,000 heartbeats every 24 hours. Obviously, this is a matter of life and death for me, yet I have no idea how it works and it seems to work amazingly well in spite of my ignorance...*

*In those moments, I can identify with the Psalmist who cried out in amazement, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Ps. 139:14) From there it is only a small step to seeing the whole universe and every smallest part of it as surprising. From the humble starting point of daily surprises, the practice of gratefulness leads to these transcendent heights.*

Brother David would later write,

*Before our eyes learned to look gratefully at the world, we expected to find beauty in good looking things. But grateful eyes expect the surprise of finding beauty in **all** things.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that theologian who was executed by the Nazis, saw the same thing. He said:

*Only those who give thanks for little things receive big things. We prevent God from giving us great spiritual gifts because we do not give thanks for daily gifts.*

I'll put it like this: *the smaller the things you can give thanks for, the greater you will become spiritually. If you can be surprised by the littlest things, you can be incredibly generous, loving, joyful and courageous.* We give thanks for smaller and smaller things until it becomes everything—every breath, every moment—life itself.

This is why we're here, as a spiritual community, it seems to me. But so often even churches get this backward! They get caught up in the doing—doing good works—with a sense of impatience, dissatisfaction or even anxiety, unless they are reaching their goals! They do not see how this actually blocks their gratitude and stunts them spiritually.

Someone said, “Gratitude turns what we have into enough.” Gratitude is not, from a spiritual point of view, a response to things, circumstances or events. But gratitude exists *before* these things and changes how we perceive them.

Now, this is extremely challenging and rarely do operate out of this kind of gratitude. Most often mine is the kind that is a response to circumstances, things and events. So I'm talking about giving not to make a bottom line or reach even a very good goal, but giving as a *spiritual practice*. Giving as a spiritual practice can help put me in touch with the kind of gratitude that turns what I have into enough. People ask, “How much should I give to the church?” And a good answer is, “Enough to help you grow your soul.”

Again, I don't pretend to have all the answers here. I struggle with this like anybody else. Sometimes I'm controlled by the belief that I need or deserve different circumstances, and get in an ungrateful mode when things aren't going well.

One thing that's helpful is something called a "gratitude journal." Each night, just write down three things that happened that day—just small things—that you are grateful for. And what this does is that it helps you practice to see the beauty and goodness in life that we habitually overlook as we continually look toward the Next Big Thing. And after a few weeks you notice a shift in perspective, as it puts you in a frame of mind of being more mindful, knowing that you're going to have to think of three things that night. As Henri Nouwen said,

*Every time we decide to be grateful it will be easier to see new things to be grateful for. Gratitude begets gratitude, just as love begets love.*

I came across a story called "The Valentine" by Ruth McDonald, that illustrates what it looks like to live with gratitude, with being surprised and amazed by the smaller things, without expectation.

*He was a shy little boy, not very popular with the other children in Grade One. As Valentine's Day approached, his mother was delighted when he asked her one evening to sit down and write the names of all the children in his class so that he could make a Valentine/or each. Slowly he remembered each name aloud, and his mother recorded them on a piece of paper. He worried endlessly for fear he would forget someone.*

*Armed with a book of Valentines to cut out, with scissors and crayons and paste, he plodded his conscientious way down the list. When each one was finished, his mother printed the name on a piece of paper and watched him laboriously copy it. As the pile of finished Valentines grew, so did his satisfaction.*

*About this time, his mother began to worry whether the other children would make Valentines for him. He hurried home so fast each afternoon to get on with his task, that it seemed likely the other children playing, along the street would forget his existence altogether. How absolutely horrible if he went off to the party armed with 37 tokens of love—and no one had remembered him! She wondered if there were some way she could sneak a few Valentines among those he was making so that he would be sure of receiving at least a few. But he watched his hoard so jealously, and counted them over so lovingly, that there was no chance to slip in an extra. She assumed a mother's most normal role, that of patient waiting.*

*The day of the Valentine box finally arrived, and she watched him trudge off down the snowy street, a box of heart-shaped cookies in one hand, a shopping-bag clutched in the other with 37 neat tokens of his labor. She watched him with a burning heart. "Please, God," she prayed, "let him get at least a few!"*

*All afternoon her hands were busy here and there, but her heart was at the school. At half-past three she took her knitting and sat with studied coincidence in a chair that gave a full view of the street.*

*Finally, he appeared, alone. Her heart sank. Up the street he came, turning every once in a while to back up a few steps into the wind. She strained her eyes to see his face. At that distance it was just a rosy blur.*

*It was not until he turned in at the walk that she saw it— the one lone Valentine clutched in his little red mitt. Only one. After all his work. And from the teacher*

*probably. The knitting blurred before her eyes. If only you could stand between your child and life! She laid down her work and walked to meet him at the door.*

*"What rosy cheeks!" she said. "Here, let me untie your scarf. Were the cookies good?"*

*He turned toward her a face shining with happiness and complete fulfillment. "Do you know what?" he said. "I didn't forget a one. Not a single one!"*

Friends, may this be the kind of giving that happens here, a giving without expectation, a giving born of a deep gratitude for the gift of Life, a giving that comes from seeing goodness and grace in every small thing.

May we be able to give thanks not just when things are good, when there is abundance, but always, "in all circumstances," even in scarcity.

If we do this, we are on the path toward spiritual Life.

It was the great mystic, Meister Johann Eckhart, who famously said,

*If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is "thank you," that would be sufficient.*

To be truly, profoundly and unconditionally grateful is the very heart of spiritual awareness. It's the litmus test for the spiritual life.

Friends, may we be fueled by gratitude. Because if our only prayer is truly "thank you," the rest will take care of itself.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*