

Grounded in Gratitude--No Matter What

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Prayer by Rev. Lucy Bunch (at end)

Reflection by Jed Shapiro (at end)

Hymns: We Gather Together, Blue Boat Home.

Piano: Passacaglia in G minor, G. F. Handel; Charlie Brown Thanksgiving Theme, Vince Guaraldi

Slides from our Stuffed Animal Sleepover Weekend

Homily by Roger Jones

The Reverend Victoria Safford is the minister of the White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Minnesota. She has written about her young family's tradition of giving thanks upon sitting down together for the evening meal--their Table Grace. It's a time of connecting and reflecting--connecting with one another and reflecting on what matters in life. She says:

“At our house the table grace we do/ does not look like religion; it looks like a hungry, tattered family at the end of a tattered day, sometimes at the end of its rope. We scramble to find the matches, to clear and set the table, to dislodge the cats and scrape our chairs into place. We clatter in, then get up again to wash somebody's hands, then finally sit down. We light the candles, ... close our eyes, and sit in silence for as long as the youngest among us can stand it, which is generally up to as high as she can count.”

Somebody might say some words of thanks, “perhaps for the food, knowing that others are going without [food].” She says, on most evenings they close with a song, one of their familiar favorites. For her family, it is a time of feeling safe and becoming settled. She writes: “The whole thing lasts, from candle to song, about two minutes, but the echo, the wake of it, lasts longer.”ⁱ Connecting and reflecting and giving thanks on a regular basis—the echo of it resonates in a lasting way.

So here we are. In the aftermath of a bruising election season, here comes Thanksgiving.

Good grief! In the midst of a tragic world-wide epidemic, with rising rates of infection, here comes a holiday for saying thanks. *Really?* Now we find ourselves approaching this holiday which is known for the renewing rituals of travel, togetherness, and hospitality.... *However*, we have to keep our distance and stay home. Out of care for those we love and for the greater good of public health, most of us have to *go without* ...hugs, handshakes and passing the cranberry sauce across the table. It's hard to count our blessings when our hearts have borne so much sorrow, when days bring so much disappointment.

Yet according to leading spiritual teachers, the times when it seems the hardest to find much to feel happy about/ are actually the times when gratitude is most important. These teachers tell us that the practice of gratitude can sustain us, no matter what happens. Gratitude can provide comfort and reassurance, because it reminds us of our connections to others. It reveals to us the abundance of our lives, even in times of hardship. Because gratitude affirms what is most important and enduring for us, it can give us courage and persistence for life's ordeals. If we allow ourselves a regular practice of giving thanks, the energy of gratitude will show up when we need it the most.

One of the most remarkable teachers and preachers of gratitude is Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk. He was born in Vienna but has spent most of his life in the U.S. He's now 94. He uses the term gratefulness to indicate the spiritual attitude of noticing and appreciating every gift of life. Gratefulness. Brother David writes, “In a world that too often reinforces separation and division, gratefulness reminds us of unity and interconnection. In a world rife with messages of scarcity and lack, grateful living brings us back to the... heart of what truly matters.”

Brother David says that gratefulness is the source of joy, but often we think it is the other way around. That is, if somebody is grateful, we think

it's because they're joyful, and things are going well for them.

He writes: "We notice that joyful people are grateful and [we] suppose that they are grateful for their joy. But the reverse is true: their joy springs from gratefulness. If [you have] all the good luck in the world but you [take] it for granted, it will not give [you]...joy."

The way to be sure to feel grateful is to be open to surprise, Brother David says. Cultivate surprise, even about ordinary things. *Especially* about ordinary things. He writes: "To recognize that *everything* is surprising is the first step toward recognizing that everything is a gift."ⁱⁱ

I think of my own gratitude practice as a spiritual antidote. Or maybe it's a preventive medicine, as it keeps an old habit of mine at bay. This habit is that it's easy for me to give more attention to the unpleasant aspects of life than I do to the blessings and bright spots of life. My frustrations and worries can weigh me down. I don't whine out loud very much, but I kind of sigh within. So I need reminders to count my blessings, recognize abundance, and be surprised at the ordinary gifts of the day.

I got such a reminder this past Monday morning. I got up early, which I try to do at this time of year in order to experience as much of the light of day as I can. I had a cup of strong tea and waited for it to perk up my brain and body. I escorted my little dog into the back yard and waited in the chilly air for her to decide where to pee, and to decide if she wanted to. The caffeine of the tea hadn't kicked in yet. I felt as if my worries about politics and the pandemic had awakened at the same time I had, for now they were in my mind. Furthermore, as I looked at another week of isolation, another stretch of days in which I wouldn't see most of you in person, I felt sad. My head was hanging down and I *was* sighing inside. My Thanksgiving plans to drive out of town had been cancelled. Of course, I was aware (and I am aware) that I'm not the only one to be separated from people I normally see at the holidays, but that didn't relieve my disappointment.

My head hung lower, as I felt sadness for the world and for myself, perhaps mostly for myself.

Then, I glanced around the yard for the dog, and as I did, I looked up and caught a glimpse of the sky. For apparently the first time since I had come outside, I saw the sun. It had been there before, but I hadn't *noticed* it! Its rays were streaming through the high leafy branches of a pair of enormous trees, two houses over. Of a yellow-green color, their narrow leaves glowed in the new sunshine. They nearly sparkled.

Wow! I said. *It's morning and I'm alive and that's beautiful.*

Isn't that why I get up early, to appreciate the new day?

So I said: *Good morning!* Then I said: *Thank you for the gift of life and the gift of this new day.*

After that surprise, that flash of gratitude, the dog and I went back inside so she could eat and I could have more tea. You know, a dog expects its meal at the same times every day; it's waiting on it. Yet when it goes after the food, the dog acts as if it's a big surprise to it. It's enjoying a *wonder* of taste, smell and satisfaction. Well, I didn't show the same gusto for my second cup of tea, but I tried to pay attention to its flavor and aroma. I sat at the table to continue the gratitude practice I had started outside. I looked out the sliding glass door at the sun on the trees and the plants on my deck. I said: *This morning I am grateful... for a night's rest in a warm bed. I'm grateful to have good health. You know, I have only a few bodily aches, but they remind me of how many things I am still able to do physically--thank goodness! For all the people who love me and support me, for the connections I can count on, I am grateful.*

Usually my prayers include both giving thanks for other people in my life and sending wishes for their wellbeing. So I did that as I brought to mind members of this congregation, my colleagues on staff here, some good friends both near and far, and a number of relatives. I can't say I went on to have a perfect Monday, but I'm glad I started it out with a few minutes of grateful contemplation.

Personal Reflection by Jed Shapiro

Brother David invites us to be grounded in *gratefulness no matter what*. Cultivating a grateful heart does not mean resigning ourselves to an unhappy status quo in life, or an unjust state of the nation. It does not require putting up with the way things are, or overlooking the lack we feel or see in the world. On the contrary, gratefulness for what we have makes us want things to be better, not just for ourselves but for everyone. For example, a heart that is grateful for the natural world, the clear air, and the fresh water we count on—in this gratefulness we want to protect the world for all its inhabitants. We want to keep the air clean and share the water with all our kindred creatures.

Gratefulness is an attitude we bring, an intention we make. It doesn't require a good mood, good luck or a good day for us to practice it. No matter what, gratefulness is a way of staying open to all the gifts of life, wherever and whenever they might appear.

Because gratitude reminds us of our connections to others, let us find *comfort and reassurance* in gratitude. Because it reveals to us the abundance of our lives, let us find *hope* in it. Because it affirms what is most important and enduring for us, let us find *courage and persistence* in gratitude.

May the echoes of gratitude resonate in us all, and return to us, and revive our spirits when we need it the most.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

ALL-COMMUNITY RITUAL:

With a marker or crayon write two words on a sheet of paper which say something about gratitude for you—what gives you gratitude? Then hold it up to the camera and turn on Gallery View on Zoom so you can see what everyone else has written. We'll hear a recording of "Giving Thanks" by our USSS choir, singing the Sunday before Thanksgiving two years ago.

grat-i-tude: The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for – and to return – kindness.

~

Last Friday evening I woke from a nap on the couch to see that the TV screen was inexplicably blurry. It took a while to realize that the rest of the room looked fuzzy too.

The advice nurse we phoned peppered me with diagnostic questions, then put me on hold to consult someone else – that couldn't be good.

My job consists mostly of reading and writing using a computer so maybe it's just eyestrain.

Now on the line, the supervising doctor said I should be seen in the ER. "Don't speed, don't rush, but don't put this off – and don't drive yourself. If it gets worse, pull over and call 911."

So-called "big issues" in my life drained away, replaced by fear, and my attempt at rational countermeasures.

The ER has everyone distanced and wearing masks these days. Screening questions had to be answered before I could even enter the building. They're very serious about identifying who needs to be isolated to protect staff and other patients – which I appreciated.

At the intake desk the staff was calm and efficient. A few quick questions were asked, my vitals were taken, and a band put on my wrist. I was sent down the hall to area "D" to be examined by an ER doctor.

While waiting, I must have seen 40 people go up and down the wide corridor: Nurses, support staff, doctors, equipment techs, and patients – some walking on their own, others being wheeled to their destination.

Each was on a particular mission to give – or receive – healing attention.

I started feeling better about being there when I realized, the longer it took to be seen, the less likely my ailment was serious.

Soon the doctor arrived asking a rapid fire series of questions. Then she administered neurological checks similar to the field sobriety tests police use at DWI checkpoints.

Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Lucy Bunch

At this time of thanksgiving let us open our hearts in a prayer of gratitude.

Holy Spirit – May we be grateful for the gifts of life – for having the experience of living with all its gifts and challenges. For this we give thanks.

May we always be grateful for this earth and all the plants and animals that sustain us, for all the incredible beauty of nature in color pattern and symmetry. For rain, and sun, darkness and light. For this we give thanks.

Spirit of community – remind us to be grateful for our human companions - for everyone who shows up everyday and does the best they can. Regardless. For this we give thanks.

Spirit of life - help us to be grateful for possibility, for rebirth and hope. Let us know that it's never over till it's over, and even then there is still possibility even after death. For this we give thanks.

Holy mystery - challenge us to have gratitude for the existence of this universe – for the cosmic creation, the big bang, for whatever through the remotest of possibility started it all off. For the mystery and wonder, for the knowing and the not-knowing and this reality that we share. For this we give thanks.

For all that we have received let our hearts be full and our souls be saturated in gratitude. So may it be. Blessed Be.

Now let us take a time of silence for the gratitude we hold in our hearts. ~

“It’s not a stroke,” she said, “but we want you to stick around for a visual acuity test.” I was directed to walk further down the hall into a crowded area across from the ambulance bays.

I made peace with the idea that I might be here for quite a while. Every few minutes, someone on the medical team would walk through the area, calling out a name like a maître d’ looking to seat the next party for dinner.

With my leg crossed, I found myself gazing at my shoe, observing the detail of the stitching, the perforated surface of the sides, and the texture of my sock.

Wait a minute – I’m here for a vision problem?

Curious, I looked up, easily making out the pinhole pattern in the acoustic ceiling.

Someone called my name. I was led to an eye chart and handed a card to cover one eye, then the other, calling out the successively smaller letters on the chart.

An admin appeared, handing me an appointment card to see an ophthalmologist Monday morning.

On the way home I recounted how **grateful** I was:

- for all who work in health care, and as first responders
- **Grateful** for the risks they take to serve and heal others
- **Grateful** for the compassionate care I’d seen offered and received

And particularly **grateful** for Terrie – my amazing wife – who spent a few hours in our cold parked car waiting...

Waiting for her husband... now able to see many more reasons for **gratitude**.

ⁱ Victoria Safford, *Walking Toward Morning* (Boston, 2003: Skinner House Books/UUA), 23.

ⁱⁱ David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer* (New York, 1983: Paulist Press), 215.