

So Thank You Already: A Sermon on Gratitude

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

November 16, 2008

There is this curious mixture in religion of the inward and the outward, the internal and the external. We deal with the world here as well as with the individual soul – with what we do in the world and who we are as humans. Today, I'd like to give the world a little rest. I am tired from the two years of campaigning, of the deep emotions of the past couple of weeks. I am ready to look inward, for at least one day. I am sure we are all mindful of the fires around us, of the continuing protests about Prop 8, about the economic crisis, but, every now and then, it is good, or at least a relief, to look inward. We'll get back to the outside world soon enough – it is waiting for us when we leave here this day.

The sermon today is about gratitude, about thankfulness, about the blessings of our lives. It is our theme for this month. Now, every sermon probably should have a thematic joke in it so here is the one for this sermon: It concerns a grandmother who was walking with her 5-year-old grandson on the beach, when suddenly a rogue wave comes up and grabs the child and carries him out to sea. She looks up to the sky, holds her fist and says, "God, this is unacceptable, unbearable. You cannot take an innocent child." And just as those words come out of her mouth, another rogue wave comes and deposits the child smiling back at her feet. She picks up the child in her arms, looks up to the sky and says, "This child had a hat!"

Be grateful for what you have.

Some years ago, I asked my Mom why she went to church. She has been an active church-goer since she was a little girl, which makes for almost one hundred years of church going. She is 97 and a half now. As soon as I asked her, though, I regretted it. My Mom is a devout Christian, a Lutheran, and by the time this question was popped, I was a UU minister. I expected an answer with the words Jesus and savior and heaven in it. But instead, she said rather plainly 'I go to church because I believe it might help me become a better person.' Going to church is her discipline.

Unlike my Mom, I am not very good at discipline. I have tried meditating and yoga, prayer and contemplative writing, and though I can do something for a while, it falls away. I don't know why this is, whether it is a fault or a gift for variety. I can't count going to church as a discipline because I get paid to be here. I have tried one thing after another, and like most of them, but they do not stick.

I remember being called a dilettante by a high school teacher, and it was clearly meant as a criticism. But when I looked the word up I was thrilled. From the Italian for delight – what could be better than that for a Norwegian kid from Minneapolis! Italian – suggesting something racy and exotic. I don't think there are any Italian Lutherans. A dilettante is an amateur, and of course amateur comes from amore, or lover. A lover of delight – pretty good. When I later thanked the teacher for calling me a dilettante, she was not amused.

So I think of this poem by ee Cummins: [number 504 in your hymnals - open to it if you want]
Thank You God for this most amazing day:
for the leeping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

[I who have died today am alive again today
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and of wings
and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth]

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any - lifted from the no
of all nothing - human merely being

doubt unimaginable You?

[now the ears of my ears awake
and now the eyes of my eyes are
opened]

Two images in the news on Thursday struck me – the first was the picture of planets from beyond our solar system, and how beautiful and awesome –in its precise meaning – the pictures were. The red of the dust cloud glowed [it reminded me of Michelle Obama's dress on election night], and the picture and the story confirmed, once again, of how magnificent the world and the universe are. One theory about the origin religion is that it is in the experience of awe and wonder – my guess is that is the origin of many things – science and art along with religion – but the idea of extra solar planets is awesome – delightful you might say. I am thankful for the deep beauty of the universe.

The second picture was of another kind of cloud – chemical clouds hanging over Asia and cutting out up to 40% of sunlight, creating dark days. Not awesome by any means but deeply disquieting. [I have been reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* recently, a post-apocalyptic book – disturbing and uplifting at the same time]. To go into space and take pictures on the one hand and to spoil our own atmosphere on the other – the whole range of human behavior can be found in those two poles. We are dark and light.

Another image of clouds: the congregation I served in Fairfax County Virginia had a close relationship with its Partner Church in Transylvania. I visited two times. Romania suffered as much as any country during the period of the Soviet Union; Ceaucescu was as brutal a dictator as existed in the Communist world. The Unitarians there are all ethnic Hungarians and they were picked out for particular hardship. Ceaucescu wanted to erase any Hungarian elements in Romania and a campaign of ethnic cleansing happened.

It was a grim country. The minister I knew there talked about how his childhood and young adult years had been stolen from him. His predecessor visited the US and Northern Virginia in the early 90s before I was there, and was invited to preach. It was his first trip out of Romania and the first time he had been on a plane.

He told it this way: his trip to the US was the first time he had ever been on a plane, and as they were flying, he said, he made a remarkable discovery. He said that as he looked around the plane at people busy reading or talking or resting, no one else seemed aware of this astonishing fact. 'Above the clouds,' Attila said, 'the sun is always shining.' He continued that there were still many dark clouds over his country but that our faith might give us wings to rise above the clouds.

That our faith might give us wings to rise above the clouds. As dark as his world was, he was grateful for this faith that could give us wings – roots hold me close, wings set me free. I am filled with gratitude for this free faith entrusted to our care.

Times can be rough; there is sorrow and reason for concern in all of our lives. Depression does come to us, and we are cheated by life now and then. Sometimes we focus on what we do not have – the child had a hat, the woman yells. Delight and despair – they are both a part of our lives. What we chose to focus on is our choice. An African American is elected president; discrimination against homosexuals is written into law. Light and dark, good and evil. Delight and despair.

In reading Thomas Merton, I found this:
"There is no neutrality between gratitude and ingratitude. Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything. Those who do not love, hate. In the spiritual life there is no such thing as an indifference to love or hate. That is why tepidity (which seems to be indifferent) is so detestable. It is hate disguised as love.

Tepidity, in which the soul is neither "hot nor cold"—neither frankly loves nor frankly hates—is a state in which one rejects God and rejects the will

of God while maintaining an exterior pretense of loving what is sacred in order to keep out of trouble and save one's supposed self-respect. It is the condition soon arrived at by those who are habitually ungrateful for the graces of life....Gratitude of itself makes us sincere—or if it does not, then it is not true gratitude.... For the grateful man knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference."

So, when life gets you down, or complaining becomes your middle, or even first name, what should you do? Well, be grateful, be thankful for all you have. When I was little and would get in a bad mood, convinced I was not getting my share from life, my mother would sit me down make me count my blessings. I had to get to three before she let me go. She still does that, and when I am wise, I do, too. Count your blessings.

We can think of gratitude in two ways –as an ethic and as a discipline. Gratitude as an ethic suggests that we take care of what we have been given. We are, after all, under an obligation in life to care for our life – if faith or religion is about anything, it is about ethics. 'Thank you god for this most amazing day' – how do we care for the earth so that that praise might continue to be sung presently and in the future? Life is a gift, after all – none of us earned life nor earned the earth and so we are under some obligation to it.

The second part of gratitude is as a discipline. Every night at dinner, we say grace – another good religious word – we sit in silence for a bit and then give everyone a chance to say what we are grateful for. We then say together 'We are thankful for everything we have and we promise to take care of it.' We end by kissing the hand of the person next to us. This is our family discipline; I urge everyone here to say a grace before dinner; it is a discipline to remind ourselves that our lives are a gift and that no matter how dark the world is, above the clouds the sun is always shining.

We live in a time, as we know, of mad materialism, of living as if there were no limit on what we can have, to limit to satisfying our desires. The economic crisis we face must have something to do with our sense that we are owed something in this world. The mad drive to consume, the emphasis on things, on pleasure rather than meaning – all of this has built a sense of entitlement into our lives.

You know this is true. I fight this, as I know many of you do, all the time. We battled it with out children. We feel entitled.

But are we entitled to anything? The more we feel entitled, the easier disappointment and ingratitude will come. This is why it is so important to think of gratitude as a discipline. Like the discipline of coming to church. Are you grateful for this congregation, for all of the love and care given to it over the years by so many people, but the insistence on freedom and equality and justice found here? Grateful?

This is what we need more of, being grateful, especially those of us to whom so much has been given by life. And what I hear in my life – maybe you do in yours, too, is a call arising from within to compassion, to a life lived with more joy and humility, with a desire for justice. The discipline of gratitude leads to an ethic of gratitude, the ethic of gratitude leads to better discipline.

The Buddha said: Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.

It is hard to be depressed or angry and mean when you are grateful and filled with thankfulness. Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.

Rob Hardies, my colleague in Washington DC wrote this

New Yorkers aren't known as a grateful people. "Please" and "thank you" are two phrases rarely heard on the island of Manhattan. If they're uttered at all, its over the hushed counters of upscale department

stores where women in fur buy expensive perfume. Please and thank you are currencies of commerce, not of gratitude. New Yorkers, it seems, are too busy to be grateful.

That's why I find the story of Point Thank You so remarkable. Point Thank You is the name for a street corner in Greenwich Village -- the corner of Christopher Streets and the Westside Highway -- where, in the months following the World Trade Center attack, New Yorkers of all stripes gathered to show their gratitude to rescue workers leaving the wreckage. Where tourists from Japan and Europe, Jews from Brooklyn, yuppies, the homeless, all gathered to say "thank you." To applaud. To shout "we love you." It's where an exhausted ironworker from Florida stopped every night to share a cigar with students from NYU. Where Greenwich Village Drag Queens passed out bottles of water to firemen from Iowa. Even the Fire Department dogs -- pressed into service to find human remains -- even they got treats from the crowds at Point Thank You.

This demonstration of gratitude erupted spontaneously on the day of the attack and quickly gathered momentum. Web sites emerged, volunteer coordinators sprung up. During the first few weeks after the attack hundreds gathered round the clock to pay tribute to rescue workers. At around five o'clock when people got out of work the numbers swelled even more. After a month or so, a solid core of a couple dozen volunteers rotated in shifts, maintaining a 24-hour presence at Point Thank You throughout the freezing winter.

After a while, the folks at Point Thank You became legendary in New York. The volunteers' tenacious commitment to gratitude throughout the frigid winter caused some in New York to refer to them -- affectionately -- as "those nuts down on the Westside Highway." The volunteers claimed this epithet as their own. The Thank You Nuts, they started calling themselves. Fools for gratitude in a city that previously hadn't known what gratitude was.

The giddy exuberance of Point Thank You got me to thinking about gratitude. Because it's something I've struggled with. You see, not too long ago, I came to realize two things about gratitude. I realized, first, that gratitude was one of the foundations of the religious life. It's fundamental. And second: I realized I wasn't a very grateful person. ' So Rob has begun to practice the discipline of gratitude.

Maybe that is a discipline I can manage. So thank you, all of you. And, I will bet that if you practice gratitude, your life will change, and for the better. Make no mistake -- if you master this discipline you will be called to your highest ideals and deepest hopes; you will be called to service, to love and to justice and to compassion. And who knows, you just might become a better person in the bargain.