

A Song of Gratitude

Psalm 100

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Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth.

Worship the Holy One with gladness;

come into God's presence with singing.

Know that the One who reigns is God,

The One who made us and to whom we belong;

we are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving; go into these courts with praise.

Give thanks to the Holy One, blessing all the holy names of the Divine.

For God is good, whose steadfast love is everlasting;

and whose faithfulness endures from age to age.

Psalm 100 tells us to shout it out. Many of us were brought up being told to do just the opposite: "Keep your voices down." "Don't raise a ruckus."

But when it comes to worshiping God, Psalm 100 claims that it's very appropriate to turn up the volume. These five verses roar with praise, using a series of imperative verbs: shout, worship, enter, praise, bless. Taken together, these commands compel the community to participate in a high liturgical activity, namely, singing in a grand procession into God's temple.

Throughout Christian history, this psalm has been employed to summon the community together in robust praise. A famous example is Ralph Vaughan Williams's arrangement of "The Old One Hundredth Psalm Tune," the processional hymn for the coronation service of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in 1953. It's a big, bold, and stunningly beautiful piece of music well worth a listen. Include links in the online pdf. (1) When the choir processes singing "All creatures that on earth do dwell," one gets a sense of the type of ritual that Psalm 100 depicts. A cathedral full of voices along with organ, brass, and percussion have a palpable effect. The psalm and Vaughn Williams's arrangement of it witness the power of sound and movement working together to glorify God.

Singing and Knowing that the One who reigns is God

Amidst the summons to the procession, the psalm presents another imperative verbal phrase, "know that the Lord is God" (NRSV, verse 3). At first gloss, this command "to know" seems out of place. We typically understand "knowing" to be an internalized mental process rather than a specific action to which one can be summoned.

Yet the Hebrew word "to know" (*yad'*) actually suggests something more. This term is used in several contexts (*Genesis 4:1 and 1 Kings 1:4*) to describe an embodied mutual awareness that

comes through sexual intimacy. However, the larger usage of the verb “to know” in the Hebrew Bible suggests that the people’s knowledge of God is not merely intellectual exercise. It is a deep and intimate awareness of the Divine, revealed in community. The community embodies this understanding of God through the ritual of the procession, through shouting, praising, and entering God’s holy places together. (2)

It is collective gratitude in Psalm 100. People singing and processing up to the temple, together giving thanks to God for God’s gifts of creating us, of being deeply and intimately known, belonging, guidance, shepherding, presence, steadfast love, faithfulness, goodness.

Psalm 100 reminds us gratitude to the Holy One can be loud song sung in community.

Psalm 100 invites us to see that Gratitude is a virtue.

Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all of the others

– Cicero (106–43bc)

A noble person is mindful and thankful of the favors he or she receives from others

– The Buddha

In a piece written by Marcus Borg, he lifts up how gratitude is a virtue. He read a book by Huston Smith, *And Live Rejoicing* published in 2012 when he was 93. Smith may be one of the the best-known religion scholars of the past half century. Borg writes – (3)

The sentence that struck me was almost at the end. Right before "last words," he said, "the two categorical, unconditional virtues... are gratitude and empathy."

Naming "empathy" as one of the two categorical virtues (with its synonym "compassion" and close relative "love") is not particularly surprising. But naming gratitude as a virtue of equal importance is.This season is a fruitful time to reflect about the relationship between gratitude and thanksgiving. Sometimes they are the same, but not always.

One of the best-known prayers of thanksgiving is in a parable of Jesus (Luke 18.9-14). A devoutly religious person prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." His thanksgiving was about his difference from others.

Less well-known is the table grace prayed by Jimmy Stewart's character in the 1965 movie ‘Shenandoah.’ For almost fifty years, it has remained with me

“Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat. Amen.”

A thanksgiving prayer? I suppose so. But it's mostly about self-reliance & deservedness.

Gratitude is very different. It is both a feeling and an awareness.

As a feeling, it is often accompanied by a sensation that is at least metaphorically physical: a virtual breaking open, an opening of the heart, a flooding of the self with sheer gratefulness.

If our lives have turned out well, how much of that is the product of our own individual achievement? And how much is the product of the genes with which we were born that gave us a level of physical vitality, intelligence, health and longevity? How much is the product of the family we were born into, with its values and economic level? How much is the product of the country and time in which we were born?

Yes, individual responsibility and achievement matter, and there are people whose lives are triumphs over adversity. But how much of our lives have depended upon circumstances that we did not create? The notion of "self-made persons" who deserve all the success and wealth they've received is simply wrong. Indeed, "deservedness" is the opposite of gratitude, even if it occasionally produces prayers of thanksgiving.

Gratitude is a virtue with ethical consequences. When we feel most grateful, it almost impossible to be cruel, callous, or indifferent. And gratitude as the awareness that life is a gift stops the hard-heartedness that often accompanies the ideology of "the self-made person" who says "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." (4)

Gratitude and transformation go together. Sometimes it is the experience of deep gratitude that changes us. Sometimes gratitude is the product of transformation. Thanksgiving Day can leave us unchanged. Gratitude does not - it changes us.

I know that to be true. However, I also I feel a heaviness today about what Thanksgiving Day in United States means. We need to unlearn much of what we were taught about the first Thanksgiving, about who the Pilgrims were, and the history of the indigenous people who lived on this land for generations. I am glad Nancy will be speaking today to help us unravel parts of the story and resources to learn more. I feel a heaviness when I want to express my gratitude for living in the United States while also feeling appalled and angry about our political divides, gun violence, systemic racism, and more. Songs of thanksgiving can be sung when I and we continue to wrestle with questions about justice, white privilege, and land.

- + Gratitude to the Holy One can be sung loudly
- + Gratitude is a virtue, a feeling, an awareness and practice that changes us
- + **Finally, Gratitude to God has something to do with grace.**

Deep gratitude leads to the realization that life, all of life, our lives, are a gift. Indeed, the words "gratitude" and "grace" have the same root. None of us created ourselves. None of us is self-made. Which echoes Psalm 100. We experience grace and we can say grace at the table. What can we learn about gratitude there? I will close with one of my favorite pieces about Thanksgiving, gratitude and grace by Anne Lamott.

We didn't say grace at our house when I was growing up because my parents were atheists. I knew even as a little girl that everyone at every table *needed* blessings and encouragement, but my family didn't ask for it. Instead, my parents raised glasses of wine to the chef: Cheers. Bottoms up. Dig in.

But I had a terrible secret, which was that I believed in God, a divine presence who heard me when I prayed, who stayed close to me in the dark. So at six years old I began to infiltrate religious families like a spy—Mata Hari in plaid sneakers.

One of my best friends was a Catholic girl. Her boisterous family bowed its collective head and said, "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts. ..." I was so hungry for these words; it was like a cool breeze, a polite thank-you note to God, the silky magnetic energy of gratitude.

...Because I grew up around alcohol and unhappy grown ups, I was very watchful, like a tiny air traffic controller. I noticed some families shortened the pro forma blessing so they could get right to the meal. Later I noticed how often people are held hostage by grace sayers, who use the opportunity to work the room,.....

...It turns out that my two brothers and I all grew up to be middle-aged believers. I've been a member of the same Presbyterian church for 36 years, 35 of them sober. My older brother became a born-again Christian—but don't ask him to give the blessing, as it can last forever. I adore him, but your food will grow cold. My younger brother is a freelance Irish Catholic.

So now someone at our holiday tables always ends up saying grace. I think we're in it for the pause, the quiet thanks for love and for our blessings, before the shoveling begins. For a minute, our stations are tuned to a broader, richer radius. We're acknowledging that this food didn't just magically appear: Someone grew it, ground it, bought it, baked it.

We say thank you for the miracle that we have stuck together all these years, in spite of it all; that we have each other's backs, and hilarious companionship. We say thank you for the plentiful and outrageous food: Kathy's lox, Robby's heartbreaking gravy. We pray to be mindful of the needs of others. We savor these moments out of time, when we are conscious of love's presence, of Someone's great abiding generosity to our dear and motley family, these holy moments of gratitude. And that is grace. (5)

May we remember our ancestors who processed and sung a psalm of thanksgiving, shouting their gratitude to the Holy One. May we show in our actions and words that we are grateful for our church, for the ways God sustains us here in love and calls us to love our neighbors near and far. May we know that gratitude to is a virtue, a feeling, an awareness and practice that changes us. And finally may the silky magnetic energy of gratitude and grace flow into you and through you today, this week and from now on. Amen.

1) Links to videos of Ralph Vaughan Williams's arrangement of "The Old One Hundredth Psalm Tune," the processional hymn for the coronation service of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in 1953. It was used again at the 50th anniversary celebration in 2002 and Jubilee Celebration in 2012. "All People That on Earth Due Dwell" is the current hymn name with text by William Kethe, 1560 and music by Louis Bourgeois, 1551.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mj9w7IUQ5AU&ab_channel=sheebp

<https://youtu.be/us2O62TTqYA?t=1>

Link to more information on the use of Psalm 100 in musical arrangements.

<http://songsofpraises.blogspot.com/2012/10/all-people-that-on-earth-do-dwell-old.html>

2) Working Preacher, Psalm 100, 6/17/2017

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11/commentary-on-psalm-100>

3) Marcus Borg, "Gratitude: One of the Most Important Virtues," 11.28.13, Day1

https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037bd/marcus_borg_gratitude_one_of_the_most_important_virtues

4) Borg

5) Anne LaMott, "Counting Our Blessings: Why We Say Grace," Parade Magazine, 11.28.13

<https://parade.com/121696/annelamott/121111-anne-lamott-counting-our-blessings/>