

Practice Gratitude

Psalm 100

Nov. 22, 2020

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Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship God with gladness; come into God's presence with singing.

Know that God is God. It is she that made us, and we are hers;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and courts with praise.

Give thanks to God, bless God's name.

For the God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever,

and faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100 New Revised Standard Version

On your feet now - applaud God!

Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into God's presence.

Know this: God is God. God made us; we didn't make God.

We're the Beloved's people and well-tended sheep.

Enter with the password: "Thank you!" Make yourselves at home, talking praise.

Thank God. Worship the Holy One..

For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever.

Psalm 100, The Message

Our Thanksgiving table will be simple this year. Tablecloth, red holiday plates, candles and a Thanksgiving meal I will have purchased a local grocery store. Jeffrey and I will savor our meal. We will probably Zoom with our sons during the meal and imagine they are sitting with us.

Thanksgiving 2020 is different for so many reasons. The local and state and even national infectious disease leaders are asking people not to travel too far or gather indoors with a group of people because it could spread the coronavirus. So we will each find ways to celebrate Thanksgiving – maybe alone, maybe with a spouse or partner, maybe with a few friends or family outdoors, maybe with phone calls and Zoom calls.

We will remember Thanksgiving 2020 because it is unique and hard but also distinctive. We will get through this hard season. We can be hopeful. There is some good news on the horizon regarding vaccines and treatment.

So the invitation is to live into gratitude and choose it. How do we embody it? What are the biblical images and prayers and stories about gratitude to God?

IN the Bible there are psalms of thanksgiving. People like Moses and Miriam who sang and danced their gratitude to the Holy One for bring the people out of slavery. Last week when I preached on the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 or probably more like 20,000 I read these words - **36** *he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving **thanks** he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.* When ever we gather around the communion table, we remember Jesus gathered with his disciples - **27** *Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you."* Giving thanks at the table.

When we do gather around tables we know there can be joy and laughter as well as tension. There can be hurting people, broken families and families just beginning; there are job struggles and health struggles and the struggle to really connect across some generational lines. And some regrets or longings.

My memory of many Thanksgivings is that often when we sit down at the table, for a brief moment, past and the future don't exist. We sit down in a moment of gratitude. For the purpose of gratitude.

And I am so grateful. I am grateful for my family. I am grateful for the ways I have been loved and shaped by them, for the laughter and the connection. The truth that shines through in that moment is that I am so thankful for the chance to be. To be with them. To live. For the opportunity to have lived. To have loved them and been loved by them. I am so grateful.

I was thinking about ways to talk about gratitude and I remembered a story a friend wrote about. She had been reading a blog for a few weeks about Emma. ([the story of Emma](#)), a nine year old girl with autism. For the first eight and a half years of her life, Emma was completely nonverbal with a mental retardation diagnosis.

My friend Kara wrote in November 2010:

But about six months ago, they had an amazing breakthrough, and Emma began to share her thoughts with her mom Sabra through a slow and deliberate method that involved pointing to letters on a paper keyboard.

For the first time in their life together, Emma and her mom were communicating with each other. Sabra discovered that Emma's favorite color was yellow, her favorite food was pizza, and that if Emma could have a pet, it would be an Orangutan. Sabra discovered that her daughter was a poet, that her vocabulary was immense and precise; she learned that Emma saw and experienced the world deeply, and was sometimes sharply and bluntly insightful.

They've been blogging together about their journey; in Emma's slow and careful words, "I am trying to teach other kids to hope."

On Tuesday they posted what will be their last blog entry. Emma asked that they be finished blogging because, as she says, “I am trying to be part of this world.”

Sabra shares, as she writes their final post: *I never could have imagined six months ago that I would know Emma as I do now. My God! How could I ever have conceived it? In all my entries, I don't know that I've been able to fully express the joy it has brought me.*

Words themselves have taken on a whole new meaning for me. I see them pour out through Emma's fingertips and every single time it feels a little like the first time. These words have filled up my life and left behind only all that is possible. After all these years of her silence, it is my desire above all else to just listen to her. And what she says could never fail my heart, not even if it might be hard to hear. (1)

John Milton says, “Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.” For me, Sabra is a witness to the power of gratitude. Gratitude is not trite. It is not shallow. It comes out of suffering and survival. And it demands honesty. Gratitude recognizes that life is filled with tragedy or at the very least anxiety, and it acknowledges our finitude, and at the same time it notices that our very existence is a gift from God; it opens us to see the gift that life is.

When we gather around our tables on Thanksgiving day, we are gathering for the purpose of gratitude, a celebration of gratitude. Gratitude is a moment of joy that is a break from time itself. It is a time out from all the struggles, from the pain behind us and the unknown ahead, because the power of gratitude is that it holds us in a moment, a moment that doesn't anticipate the future or regret the past. It takes us for a short time outside of our existence, while also holding the truth of our existence with it.

For Sabra and Emma remind us to live in the moment. And that life itself – with all its tragedy- is a gift. We are usually pretty unable to live in the present much at all. We are always remembering or regretting the past, or dreading or anticipating the future.

So often we are looking forward with our calendars and our schedules and our plans and our worries and our dreams, and we are looking backwards at the things we wish we'd done differently or the things we wish we could go back and live again and never leave, the people we miss or the mistakes we've made that can never be corrected. I think this has shifted some in the last 7 months during the pandemic and sheltering in place. Maybe we have learned to live more in the present moment since so much was uncertain.

When we choose to pause in gratitude, we give ourselves the chance live in a moment out of time. A sample-sized taste, a foreshadowing of a future altogether different, not a future like the ones we live in: filled with the consequences of past choices or impossibilities of human limitations. Not a future that comes from the present - from the pasts we've lived and the future we are creating -but a future that comes from the promise. The future outside of time. Because someday time will be wiped away, and what we will have is the eternal moment of gratitude. We will have the suspended joy of being alive, of being with God face to face, of being wholly, truly, fully alive. Gratitude lets us see the kin-dom of God.

How do we practice gratitude? I have been reading a book by Diana Butler Bass entitled *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*. Bass wrote it in 2016 when she was struggling and not feeling very grateful. In her book she offers 10 practices of gratitude that she got from Mary Jo Leddy in her book *Radical Gratitude*.

- 1) *Begin before you are ready*. "Beginning Steps in gratitude do not have to be great or grand. They need only be real."
- 2) *Practice gratitude in prayers, reflections, chants and meditations*.
- 3) *Gather with "like-spirited" people*. Find or start a group committed to practicing gratefulness as a way of life.
- 4) *Live more simply*. Let go of material things that burden you.
- 5) *Look for good examples of grateful people* in your life and from history. Learn from them.
- 6) *Think with your heart*. Trust your feelings of gratefulness and your longings for a better way.
- 7) *See differently*. Develop "soft eyes."
- 8) *Be connected to a longer wisdom tradition*, one that helps you understand spiritual insights of the past.
- 9) *Find a beloved community*, a neighborhood or church or worship gathering, and be part of it, really part of it.
- 10) *Contemplate the face of the world*. Gratitude empowers us to stare at reality and overcome what is challenging, violent and evil. Do not turn away from the world; turn toward it. (2)

These are ways we can practice gratitude as we hold onto a larger vision of the Holy. In the Christian household, we are invited to see that there is no pain Christ does not hold. And one day when time is no more, and the kin-dom of God will come in all its fullness, there will be no more pain and no more suffering at all, no more inability to connect, fears or worries, sickness or sadness. Only wholeness, abundance, peace, wrapped in Divine love and grace.

I like what Maya Angelou said about gratitude.

*Let gratitude be the pillow on which you kneel to say your nightly prayer.
And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.*

So when the moments come, the small moments of gratitude,
when Thanksgiving comes –whenever and every time it comes,
whether it creeps up on you in complete surprise
or whether it is a deliberate decision as you sit around the table

Those little moments of gratitude say to us:

Practice Gratitude.

Strengthen your mental and spiritual muscles daily.

Don't worry about tomorrow or dwell on yesterday.

God's love holds it all – past, present and future.

Just eat this meal, give thanks for people who loved you well.

Recognize that you are alive, and give thanks.

Let yourself be held in the timeless gift, the eternal promise, of gratitude and grace.

Amen.

1) Rev. Kara Root, "Gratitude's Perspective," Nov. 25, 2010, in the hereandnow
<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2010/11/gratitudes-perspective.html>

2) Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*. (2016).
New York, NY: HarperCollins, pp. 156-57.