

Gratitude Happens

It is usually expected that the preacher will bring up the subject of gratitude on the Sunday before Thanksgiving and that he or she will remind us all to practice giving thanks and not just talk about it. Not always mentioned in sermons, though, is that the practice is a little harder than it sounds. I saw on BeliefNet the other day – BeliefNet is an online clearing house for religious news and discussions – I saw a chat group about being grateful – with an interesting twist. People were asked to name five things they were grateful for – *five different things each day* for a week. Try it some time! As I followed the discussion, most people started with the usual suspects – a roof over their heads, food, health, family, friends, this good nation, pets, and so on – but the discipline of not repeating themselves soon got to people. After the usual suspects, what *are* we grateful for? It didn't take long before some interesting things started popping up – somewhere around the third day, or numbers 11-15 on the week's list. One woman was thankful for a rape crisis center. Hmm. A man was – in retrospect – thankful for losing his old job because he is now doing alcohol counseling, something he loves and feels called to. Probably not something he gave thanks for at the time. Another gave thanks for rainy days to putter around the house when no one else is home. What's up there? Still another realized that she really didn't like her grown children very much, a realization that caused her to do some forgiveness work which in turn has caused her to like herself and her kids a bit better. Who knew? Somewhere down the list someone gave thanks for God. Imagine that! Although his point seemed to be that, having found God for real, he doesn't feel the need to go to church anymore. Oh, well!

So this morning I want to talk about things a little lower on the list, below the usual suspects, things we can be grateful for – things perhaps less perfunctory and closer to our hearts. You've probably all seen the bumper sticker that

proclaims *Stuff Happens* – or some variant of it. Have you seen it? I don't like it – it's the ultimate whiner message – *ah, the universe is raining on me again!* But haven't we all had days when we wonder out loud? Still, I propose a different message to hold up this morning: *Gratitude happens*. Except, of course, gratitude doesn't just rain down on you. Gratitude comes from the inside. Gratitude is intentional. Gratitude *is an attitude*.

I invite you to look at our lives this way. We have two pathways inside of us. First there is the pathway of judgment. At worst the path of judgment is a cesspit of self-pity, blame and competition. The other day I was driving home with what I thought was a really nice bottle of wine – I'd actually spent \$15 on it and was feeling flush and expansive. That is, until I happened to catch a radio show on wine that described a wonderful wine I could purchase that was far superior to the "pedestrian" \$15 bottle of wine I had just purchased. So there you are. Shows you what I know and where I belong in the pecking order of wine sniffers. Do I need to give other examples of what judgment does to us all?

Of course, sometimes judgment is fun. A wonderful example is the genre of St. Peter and the Pearly Gates jokes. Here judgment gets full exercise of the human imagination. Take, for example, this one. Stop me if you've heard it!

So three hospital professionals die and come to the pearly gates. OK, asks St. Peter, what qualifies you to come through these gates?

The first, a delivery room nurse, talks about delivering thousands of babies, sometimes against heavy odds, and St. Peter, teary eyed, says, Come right in and make yourself at home.

The second, a doctor in the trauma unit, talks about saving many lives over long hours and many hard decisions. St. Peter responds heartily, Come in, come in, enjoy your eternal rest.

The third is an HMO claims analyst who posits that she saved \$100,000s denying frivolous claims and she turned back hundreds of people trying to claim benefits they didn't really deserve. Yes, yes, replies St. Peter, come right in, you've been pre-approved for a three day stay!

So – judgment can be fun. Yes?

But where does judgment get you in the long run except disappointment and victimhood? Where you really get searching for someone to blame? Do you really want to end up feeling the universe has rained on you?

The other path is the path of Gratitude and gratitude sets an intention. Gratitude believes, you see, that you have choices. You can believe that if you ask you will be given all the resources you need to meet your own future. There was a wonderful book some years ago called *Sleeping With Bread*. It's a book about being real. It's a book about facing fear. It's a book about abundance and the trust that nothing you really need can be taken away from you.

In one story in the book the authors are called to talk with a family in crisis. I don't remember all the details, but the story goes something like this. The mother, Ann, is terminally ill and everybody in the family is caught in being afraid and being afraid to talk about being afraid. So they're stuck, they're angry, and the universe is raining down on them. The authors first ask each member of the family what their biggest fear is about Ann's impending death. The answers are not quite what you might expect. The daughter is afraid to grow up without her mom to show her how to be a good mom herself. The husband is afraid of being alone without Ann's companionship. Ann herself says the most interesting thing. She says she was in the store the other day and overheard a conversation in which a woman said she could not afford a coat she particularly liked, so she

would wait and perhaps buy it next year. Ann, hearing this, reflects that she will never need another coat and that this realization is both sad – and oddly freeing!

Now this is not a story of prayer that changes the things that rain down from the universe. Instead, it's a story about how Ann and her husband set aside time to be together. How Ann and her daughter take time to explore mom and daughter things. How Ann decides to take all her clothes and coats and books and jewelry and give them to people she loves, each with a note explaining what it is about that person she is grateful for and why she is giving that person this gift. How in the end, Ann dies and there are indeed sadness and tears, but there is gratitude to spare, and no fear and no regret.

When Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel this morning that there will be a day when the Son of Man will come and separate the sheep and the goats, it sounds mightily like we are being summoned to judgment. But in another sense we are being summoned to choose. What path will we take? The one that says *Stuff Happens* and I'm ticked and disappointed? Or the one that says *Gratitude Happens* and I have all I need to get through the stuff? The choice is life-changing!

As you come to Thanksgiving this year and perhaps feel called to make a Gratitude list, go ahead and list all the usual suspects. But keep going. Keep going until you get down deeper. You'll know when you're there. You'll recognize people, places, times and situations that are the real stuff of your heart. Some things will surprise you with their grace – grace you may not have paid much attention to. Such goodness can pass unnoticed until we're ready to start looking for it! So reset your intention button from judgment to grateful. Believe that nothing that really matters can be taken from you and nothing you are afraid of

is truly real. For, you see, this is holy ground. This is where Jesus has come to meet you and invite you to follow him into the land of abundance where you will find you always have enough to spare. Amen