

“Awakening to Gratitude”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

We’ve all heard the command.
We’ve probably said it, too—to someone in our lives,
be it our children, our partners, or ourselves.

“Say, ‘thank you.’”

There’s a part of me that cringes whenever I hear those words,
even though there are good reasons for them,
and even though I’ve uttered them myself, from time to time.

I cringe because you can’t command gratitude.

It’s not something one can be compelled or convinced or coerced to feel.

We can, perhaps, make someone mutter the words,
but we can’t make them mean what they say.

A person is either grateful or not.

You either feel genuinely thankful for something, or you don’t.

There’s not a lot of room in between.
Ambivalence isn’t exactly gratitude.

It doesn’t really make sense to say I was partially grateful.
Or I was mildly thankful.

It’s true that something can be a mixed blessing—
that you can feel grateful for part of something, but not grateful for all of it.

You might be grateful for the storm that brought rain to your garden,
but not the flooding that ruined everything in the basement,

or the lightning bolt that knocked out your hydro for two days.

Still, finding a mixed blessing in something is a vast improvement over what the famous monk Thomas Merton had to say about thanklessness.

“There is no neutrality,” he said, “between gratitude and ingratitude. Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything.”

Those are pointed words for a monk to make.
But he has a point worth taking.

Ingratitude, or even indifference, is symptomatic of spiritual distress.

They are signs that one has developed a misplaced sense of self-reliance, mistakenly thinking themselves fully sufficient to supply their own needs—oblivious to the grace that abounds all around us, the acts of kindness and kinship, the interconnected web of life that is required for all life to exist—including our very own.

G. K. Chesterton put it best when it said that,
“When it comes to life, the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.”

“Whether we take things for granted or take them with gratitude.”

Ingratitude comes with taking the world, and our place in it, for granted.

It comes when we fail to give consideration to the billion vital details that make our own being possible, from the warmth of the sun and the tilt of the earth, to the rainfall that waters the crops from which we draw every bit of our material sustenance.

To be ungrateful is to be indifferent to the miracle of life itself.
And to be indifferent, ambivalent, or unmoved is, I believe, to be less alive.

Now, there are times, of course, when it's hard or seemingly impossible to feel gratitude.

Times when depression or other challenges set in
and cloud our ability to be fully connected with our life.

Those are incredibly difficult days,
and one of the most frustrating things to hear when in that place
is the command, even in a friendly voice, to, “say, ‘thank you.’”

But most of us don’t dwell in that difficult place,
at least not most of the time.

And, yet, ingratitude and indifference can be a common state of being.

So, whatever are we to do?

How do we move from taking life for granted to taking it with gratitude?

Quite simply, we wake up.
We wake up to the world around us.
We pay attention.
We give thought to what sustains us.

We see the ways our lives are connected with everything else,
and truly recognize that we are held in the delicate web of being
by countless threads of grace.

And, yet, it can be so hard to wake up.

There are times, I think, when most of us could greatly benefit
from having a near-death experience.

Something that shakes us up and wakes us up to life.

An ordeal that causes us to see
that even amid the hardships and heartache of life,
there are boundless miracles that hold us together,
even when we feel we that everything is falling apart.

I was reminded of this in a poignant way this week
by an email from Nancy Semkin,
the member of our congregation working right now
in Sierra Leone with Doctors Without Borders.

Nancy is an administrator, helping to organize practical supports, such as food and sleeping arrangements, for the medical teams who are on the front lines of the world's struggle with ebola.

While Nancy is safe, she and everyone there is surrounded by an unfolding horror.

A few days ago, two of the doctors in her unit became infected. She and the people around her are understandably devastated to have two of their own, there to help heal others, now battling the virus themselves.

Earlier this week, the hospital staff gathered around a speakerphone to yell out their gratitude to Nancy and her team for the spaghetti dinner that was their lunch that day.

I'm guessing that no one had to tell them to say "thank you."

I imagine, there in the trenches between life and death, reminded of life's fragility with the dawning of each new day, that gratitude for something as simple as spaghetti is relatively easy to come by.

How awake to life's precious hold on us must we be to give thanks, unbidden, to those who sustain us and save us, and make our lives what they are?

The Anglican priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of being invited many years ago by "a wise old priest" to come speak at his church.

"What do you want me to talk about?" I asked him.

"Come tell us what is saving your life now," he answered.

It was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church.

All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on.

All I had to do was figure out
how I stayed as close to that reality as I could,
and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners
figure out those same things for themselves.

I wonder about the sermon I would preach in that same situation.
And I wonder about the sermon that you would give.

What is, after all, saving your life right now?

Do you know? And are you grateful for it?

The answers we might give would surely be different by the day,
as varied as our individual experiences, and, yet,
as common as the air that we breathe into the lungs
that pump life into us again and again.

This Thanksgiving, may we start there. With our breath.

Go ahead, take three deep breaths.
Feel the force of life rushing into you.
Feel the pulse of your own being and resist indifference.
Resist ingratitude.

For these breaths which we've taken are gifts,
and there will come a day when we will take our last.

Until that moment, let us be awake to our life.

Let us awaken to gratitude that we are part of this complicated miracle.

And may it not require a near-death experience for us to join
with the poet e. e. cummings in his great hymn of gratitude:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and 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)

May we be awake and open,
with gratitude for this day and all of the days we are given.

Amen.