

“Unexpected 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.

Next month my father would have celebrated his 82nd birthday. I say, “would have” because he died one warm June night four years ago. According to reports, at 11:45pm he was driving his small decade-old black pickup truck along a road just outside of his hometown of Leavenworth, Kansas when another vehicle pulled out of a gas station right in front of him. In order to avoid the collision, his reflex response was to turn away from the unexpected car, which sent his vehicle shooting down into a ravine.

Paramedics arrived on the scene soon afterward to find Dad a bit shaken, but doing okay given the circumstances...engaging in his usual gift of gab and in good spirits.

He was loaded into an ambulance, and sometime during the 25-minute ride to Kansas University Medical Center he lost consciousness and could not be revived despite heroic measures to do so, at least until my sister and brothers could arrive.

Upon surveying dad’s apartment the next morning, my brother noted that a grocery list had been laid out on the kitchen table. A load of clothes had been neatly folded and awaited being placed in a dresser. Chicken breasts from the freezer had been placed in the sink to thaw for dinner the next day.

Clearly this was not a man who had not planned on dying that night.

And yet he did, unnecessarily, and his last minutes were traumatic ones.

It might surprise you, therefore, to learn that all his loved ones, family and friends alike, without exception, were grateful that this occurred.

No, my father was not hated by everyone who knew him. It was in fact out of love that our gratitude emerged.

In his lifetime, Dad was a strong man. He carried his 5’7” stocky frame with pride, was hard working and determined...a man’s man. He was also a cardiac patient who had endured seven bypass surgeries and had been told that he couldn’t be opened again, despite growing discomfort due to complications from his condition.

We all wondered how Dad would fare with illness that would slowly disintegrate his ability to, say, hop in his little Toyota pickup and go for a ride at midnight.

He was spared of that sometimes long difficult road that many people are not spared of. And for that we are all thankful.

We all know of these kinds of situations, where at first glance it seems impossible to be grateful, but with deeper understanding and more context we are.

A vast majority of the time this is the way gratitude works.... something happens that in some way pleases us, and we are thankful.

And this isn't limited to the more typical life experiences that elicit feeling of thanks, such as getting a pony for your birthday or buying a winning lottery ticket or getting a promotion at work.

Perhaps it is higher-order experiences that turn out to be surprisingly gratitude-inducing, such as a family being united in thanks for the way their loved one's life ended.

Or a person in recovery who is grateful for the mountainous albatross of substance abuse lassoed around their neck, who comes to recognize that this "burden" is the avenue through which their mind and spirit have been released to soar to heights never before experienced.

Michael J. Fox speaks of this in his book "Lucky Man." Clearly no one would ever put an order in for a debilitating disease such as Parkinson's. And yet Michael considers himself exceedingly fortunate because this disease awakened him.

We hear this when he says, "For everything this disease has taken, something with greater value has been given--sometimes just a marker that points me in a new direction that I might not otherwise have traveled."

Each of these examples of gratitude, including the one we heard about in the reading, however lofty or fluffy they may be, have something in common....they all fall under this same formula:

Something happens that in some way is immediately or ultimately pleasing or beneficial to us, and so we feel happy, and then we feel grateful for what made us happy.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with this...this formula, this order of things is in our nature, it is a lovely part of our perfectly created beings, and brings forth some of the sweetest nectar of joy that we can know in this life.

But let us not be satisfied with this beautiful and basic perspective on gratitude.

For those of us who thirst for deeper understanding of our truest and divinely-created selves, I pose this question...

How much we consider the formula from the flip side?

Instead of “I feel happy, and so I am grateful,” what if the order is....

I am grateful, and living with a spirit of gratitude evokes a sense of happiness.

Now, one might say, “OK, you feel grateful, and feeling grateful makes you feel happy. But...what exactly is making you feel grateful?”

First, let us consider these words...insignificant as they may seem, they illuminate a significant distinction.

This kind of gratitude is not one born of feeling, but instead is one woven into one’s way of being, how one moves in the world and sees the world.

Susanna Barlow eloquently speaks to this when she says,

“Gratitude is a way of being, not just a feeling. It is cultivated and practiced rather than attained or achieved, and it has the power to change one’s life. There is a distinctive feeling associated with gratitude; a kind of utter awe, indescribable and beyond expression. Being immersed in true gratitude is one of the most powerful spiritual experiences one can experience, bringing us sometimes even to tears. It feels like being aligned with truth and the closest sense of who or what God is that one can imagine.

*Gratitude is like a camera that captures the essence of life that is always there but not often seen or recognized. It is seeing with your eyes all the way open. It is having far vision and close-up seeing at the same time. Buddhism has a name for this: vipassana. The word, literally translated means ‘clear seeing’ and refers to moment-to-moment mindfulness. But gratitude is more than just being in the present moment. It is the **result** of the present moment; it is what happens when we step into the moment. Gratitude sees without judgment, recognizes the wisdom of life as it is and has an expansive, all-encompassing quality that is a powerful paradigm shifter. Viewing life through the lens of gratitude means seeing through the eyes of love; comprehending the wholeness and perfection of life as it is, without mistakes.”*

When I hear these words my spiritual Spidey sense says, ‘Yes.’ My soul recognizes their wisdom.

And my mind buys in too, thinking that this sounds like a pretty simple formula (speaking of formulas), especially for people of faith who make our way to spiritual gatherings such as this one on a Sunday morning.

Certainly it would be easily understood and integrated by faith leaders, like a minister.

Well, if you’re sitting in your seat thinking, “I’m not sure how much of a ‘just-because’ grateful spirit I have if something cool isn’t happening to make me feel grateful,” ...if you’re thinking that, I assure you you’re not alone.

I am constantly challenged by this, and sometimes it seems like I might actually be back sliding.

Some of you may know that about a year ago I transitioned from congregational ministry to community ministry, and that the new community ministry consists of running a painting business which offers newcomers the opportunity to receive training and employment.

Sounds nice, and it is nice. But then there are the daily realities that can pull hard on me actually being a living manifestation of gratitude.

Being a new business owner with no business sense or background, when really you are only a minister who happens to paint., organizing crews and clients when you never won awards for organization to begin with. Juggling CRA and WSIB and IOUs and the occasional emergence of the quiet but unmistakable question, “I like the work and I love the people I’m doing it with. But is this really doing ministry at all?”

When I need a gratitude shot in the arm, I often turn the words of my favourite poet Mary Oliver, whose simplicity and open spirited nature never fails to inspire, to bring me back to my centre.

I’ll share one such piece with you now, entitled “The Place I Want to Get Back To”

The place I want to get back to
is where in the pinewoods
in the moments between
the darkness and first light
two deer came walking down the hill,
and when they saw me
they said to each other, okay,
this one is okay,
let’s see who she is
and why she is sitting on the ground like that,
so quiet, as if asleep, or in a dream,
but, anyway, harmless;
and so they came on their slender legs
and gazed upon me,
not unlike the way
I go out to the dunes and look
and look and look into the faces of the flowers;
and then one of the deer leaned forward *and nuzzled my hand.*
And what can my life bring to me that could exceed that brief moment?
For twenty years I have gone every day to the same woods,

not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts, bestowed, can't be repeated.
If you want to talk about this
come to visit. I live in the house near the corner,
which I have named Gratitude.

One might think that the apex of this poem is the deer nuzzling out of her hand. And perhaps it is. But the majority of the poem speaks beautifully to gratitude as a way of *being* instead of being thankful one amazing moment in time.

For decades she placed herself with quiet reverence in nature's ever-outstretched hands, not expecting to be gifted in some fantastical way, beyond the gift inherent in simply and fully being there. Just lingering, looking into the face of flowers.

Seeing the holiness in those moments, in those simple and natural places, is born from gratitude being a way of being.

While nature is a setting where becoming grateful may be easily cultivated for some, it can bloom in the urban jungle as well. I was reminded of this recently when I had an interaction with a woman commonly identified by the world as a 'beggar.'

I had seen this woman before. As people asking for help often do, she stands at the same back entrance to a Loblaws that I frequent. On several previous occasions I had quickly dug my hand into my change purse to offer her a loonie or toonie as I hustled out to get on to my next adventure.

On this one occasion I saw her when I entered and exited, but time was too tight, even for the literally 10 seconds it would take to say hello and give her a coin.

My next destination was fortunately across the street, and it was there that I realized I didn't have my purse. Must've left it at the store. My immediate reaction was a mix of fear for the high likelihood that I'd never see my wallet again, and frustration because I didn't have time for this!

Back to the store I went, and the woman was still at her spot, and again gently said, "Can you spare some change today?"

In my frustration, I curtly muttered under my breath (but not so under that she couldn't hear me) "I'd be happy to if I could find my purse."

She then lit up and said, "Oh, it must be your purse I found! Black, long strap, paint all over it, yes? I saw it in a cart in the parking lot and I brought it in to customer service where it would be safe. I knew someone would take it if I didn't."

This woman, clearly a person of need, had the chance to easily take over a \$1000 that was in my purse that day. I doubt she ever knew that the purse contained that much money, because she probably didn't look inside to learn of its contents.

That day each of us experienced gratitude. I experienced gratitude to her for not taking my stuff. It was not until later that I came to understand her spirit of gratitude, evident when she smiled at me and said, "I don't have much, but I have enough."

As she was that day, so are we confronted every single day with choice points about where enoughness resides in our lives, and how gratitude fits in. May we ever strive to grapple with and grow in this wisdom.