

“Thanks”

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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.

There’s an old Chassidic story that tells of three rabbis who were in a huge hurry to reach their destination before sunset on the Sabbath.

Riding through darkening and dreary woods they heard the sound of singing.

As they got closer to the sound, they saw a young boy dressed in rags— filthy and malnourished— dancing, and singing at the top of his lungs.

Astonished, one of the rabbis asked the boy: “Why are you so joyful?”

“Because I’m lost in the woods!” he yelled, while still singing and dancing.

“And why are you dancing?” asked another.

“Because I’m hungry and scared!”

Now, as you might imagine, the rabbis were very confused.

Surely, anyone lost and hungry in the woods would not be singing for joy but crying out in fear.

But at that point, the boy turned to the esteemed rabbis to explain.

“My teachers, I have been lost in these woods for three days now, without food, and braving the cold and the wild animals.”

“For the first two days I was very scared.
I cried out in hunger and fear.”

“And then, this morning, I woke up and thought:
‘I’m hungry, I’m cold, and I’m scared.’”

“And then I thought,
‘That means that I am still alive!’”

With that, he started to dance and sing some more.

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As the Sufi poet Rumi put it:
“There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

We could add that there are countless ways
to give thanks and praise “for all that is our life.”

That there are endless opportunities
with the rising of the sun each day
to lift our hearts in gratitude for what is,
sometimes even when it is more than we can seemingly bear.

Through the mundane and the unexpected,
life bids us—when we’re awake to it— to utter a word of thanks,
to offer a prayer of gratitude for the miracle and majesty of it all,
to feel, deep in our bones, that we are inexplicably part
of the marvelous unfolding of the universe,
a gift for which our hearts might resound with ceaseless thanksgiving.

And, yet, I can’t imagine that a single one of us,
myself included, does this with the dedication that the great gift of our life merits.

We forget.
We fail to notice.
We can’t be bothered.

The only prayer on our lips, if there is one at all,

is a half-hearted “meh”.

And, yet, as the parent of any small child can tell you,
forcing someone to say “thank you”
does not instill a genuine feeling of gratitude.

The feeling—the unbidden prayer, if you will—
has to come from somewhere else.
And it has to be felt, naturally.

Frederick Schleiermacher, the founder of liberal theology,
speculated, at the turn of the 19th century,
that religious experience is rooted in our emotional centre,
creating within us a feeling of “absolute dependence”—
a dependence he said we felt toward what he called the “eternal” or God.

In 1799, he wrote a book for his non-religious friends called
On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers.

These were people who had rejected religious teachings
and were living very secular lives.
They were the “nones”—the religiously unaffiliated of their time.

In the book, to these cosmopolitan, skeptical friends, he argued:
“You have succeeded in making your earthly lives so rich
and many-sided that you no longer need the eternal.”

Sound like anyone you know?

What I hear him taking his friends to task for
is an arrogance grown out of a mistaken sense of self-sufficiency.

For thinking themselves wholly independent,
rather than seeing that they, and we with them,
rely on the grace of a million other ordinary things in order to survive.

Our seventh principle calls us to live with respect
for the interdependent web of life, of which we are a part.

It is a radical theological statement—
at odds with much of human history for the past 3,000 years.

For much of the Western world,
especially that steeped in the Abrahamic traditions,
there has been a strong belief that humans were placed
above the created order, in a separate place, somehow outside the web.

The Book of Genesis says as much.
Humans were made to rule over the other creatures.

But indigenous and other earth-based traditions
have seen it differently—have seen it as it truly is:
that we are inextricably bound up with everything else,
that our life, that our being, that our well-being
is part of the whole of life, and is absolutely dependent
upon a vast web of being beyond ourselves.

Some call this the eternal, others God.
There's no shortage of names.

But by whatever name you call it,
such an understanding of life requires great humility.
And it calls for deep gratitude.

“There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”
There are countless ways to give thanks.

And, yet, if we're not feelin' it... what are we to do?

Practice. Practice, until we do.

This mostly involves learning to simply pay attention.

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The week before last, at the end of my study leave,
I was on a silent retreat in an Anglican monastery,
down in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I have long-standing connections with the community there,
going back to the 90's and my days in university,
when I met with one of the brothers for regular spiritual direction.

Amid the noise of the world, of late, I have been craving silence.

By the time I got to the monastery, I was ready to be still,
and enter into the kind of reflection and discernment I think
is only available when we have slowed down long enough to listen.

Over the days I was there, I kept the schedule of the monks.

Five times a day, I participated in the worship life
of the community, with services starting before dawn
and the last ending just before bed.

The chapel bell would ring and off I would go
with the brothers and the others on retreat
to sit in an ice-cold church to chant ancient psalms.

I tried really hard to love it. I did.
But I found it excruciating, at least for the first couple of days.

Of course, there were my strong theological objections,
to almost everything.

Each service involved chanting four or five of the psalms,
many of which are profoundly problematic.

And some of them are really long—especially when you're shivering.

And the monks in this monastery,
as lovely and loving as they are, chant at a snail's pace.
Between each line of the text, they take a grand pause of several seconds.

And, yet, after a couple of days, I came to love it.
It didn't matter what we were chanting anymore, it was the ritual, the practice,
the habit of slowing down and breathing that made all the difference.

Being caught up in the prayer life of the monks spilled over
into other parts of my day, as I began to notice things,
to see what I hadn't, or couldn't, before.

Twice a day, I would sit for an extended time of meditation and prayer in my room,

looking out the window to the cloister below, and the Charles River beyond the wall.

I took in the dappled sunlight on the trees.

I watched the veneer of ice on the river melt.

I gave myself the gift of watching,
without time constraints,
without a pull to do anything else,
as two swans ate their breakfast,
their regal heads plunging below the frigid waters, over and over again.

The words of Mary Oliver's poem, "How I Go to the Woods"
resonated deeply for me in those moments.

She writes:

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all
smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable.

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old
black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune
as motionless as an uprise of weeds, until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can
hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing.

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If you have ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

Indeed.

For such stillness is an all-too-rare gift, "in this crowded life we lead."

But, there, in my room, or walking along the river in the late-afternoons,
or chanting in the cold, I felt myself a part of it all,
and in my heart I experienced an outpouring of gratitude.

And, if I'm honest, also some grief

that the pace of my life—that the pace of our lives—
doesn't often allow us to study the blessings that abound at every turn.

That we live in a way that makes it hard
to kneel and kiss the ground as often as we might.

Perhaps that's why the 13th century monk and mystic
Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you say in your entire life
is 'Thank You,' that would suffice."

Sometimes it may just have to be enough.

And, yet, I think we can hope for better.

I think we can hope for more—
for more intention, more attention,
more connection to the source of all that sustains us.

My colleague Galen Guengerich,
the minister at All Souls Unitarian in New York,
has advanced the notion that gratitude
is the defining daily practice of what it means to be a UU.¹

He explains that:

For Jews, the defining discipline is obedience:
To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God.

For Christians, the defining discipline is love:
To be a faithful Christian is to love God
and to love your neighbour as yourself.

For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission:
To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah.

"And what of us?," he asks.
"What should be our defining religious discipline?"
He says it should be gratitude.

¹ Galen Guengerich, "The heart of our faith," *UU World*, Spring 2007.

He reasons that a “discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters.”

“[And] from this flows an ethic of gratitude that obligates us to create a future that justifies an increasing sense of gratitude for the human family as a whole.”

This ethic of gratitude, he says, “demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return.”

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To make gratitude a spiritual practice requires discipline.

A commitment to humility,
a willingness to return again and again,
to the understanding that our fragile existence
is related to that of everything else.

It doesn't require living life as a monk,
but it does invite us into a rhythm of mindfulness
that helps us to behold and respond
to the blessings that make up our life.

While this may often need to be a solitary pursuit,
there is certainly something to be said for also doing it in community.

Earlier in my study leave, I spent a week
with my six of my classmates from seminary.

Starting this group was the smartest thing I did in divinity school.

We have met monthly for fourteen years now,
and once every year or so, we gather for a retreat.

This is the most important thing I do related
to my own ongoing professional development and well-being in ministry.

We challenge and console and inspire one another.

And we have fun.

Toward the end of our time together,
we took a boat to the Channel Islands,
off the coast of California near where we were gathered.

We hiked across the small island called Anacapa,
reaching an outlook aptly named "Inspiration Point."

I snapped the photo on the cover of your Order of Service.

It is literally lands-end, as the rock outcroppings from the sea taper off.

To one side, there is only open ocean
between this point and Antarctica.

As the seven of us stood there taking in the scene,
one of our group recited the first line
of e. e. cummings' great hymn of gratitude.

"i thank You God for most this amazing day."

After a couple of beats of silence,
another person added the next line,
and then someone else offered the one after that.

On it went, the group of us conjuring
this great prayer of thanksgiving, together.

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)

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At the end of this prayer, looking out over the ocean,
we held a shared silence for a very long time.

Life endlessly offers us such moments,
be they grand or small, if we pay attention.

Individually or together,
whether we draw on the words of the poets,
or are moved to speak within the silence of our own heart,
let us all become and be a people of gratitude.

Let us kneel often to kiss the ground.

Let the prayer found on our lips
ever be one of thanks.

Amen.