

Gratitude: More than We Deserve

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered November 18, 2018
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I've got to admit one thing right from the start: It's tough to be grateful these days.

But it's late November, right? The month that we in America celebrate what is perhaps our most significant non-religiously inspired holiday, the one in which we are entreated to be grateful. With that holiday defining the month for many of us, we are told – by some unknown moralizer in the sky – that we should practice gratitude the entire month of November. Whether by posting daily bits of gratitude on social media, or following thematic calendars at our religious communities, or simply working up enough spirit to enthusiastically embrace what could otherwise be difficult family gatherings this coming Thursday, we are encouraged to think about what it is we are grateful for, and to express that gratitude more bountifully this time of year than any other.

And some of us think, “Aw, do I really have to?”

This task of finding and expressing gratitude this month is made even more difficult by the presence of the other major “holiday” in November that we just endured -- Election Day. To say this is a holiday is, of course, technically inaccurate, which is a pity. In what could be in a thriving democracy a day of celebration of our common citizenship and the glorious mechanisms of government we create together – if Election Day were indeed a national holiday – we instead have a day, a season really, of anxiety and, for many of us, a guilt-ridden reminder of our obligation to participate in this supposed democracy either plugging our noses and

voting for the least offensive candidate or, perhaps worse, randomly filling in blanks because of our bafflement at figuring out which ones to fill in after being barraged by negative campaign ads for the previous couple months.

So, to make matters worse – at least for some of us – we are reminded that we should be grateful for the precious right to vote, yet we might feel something less than gratitude for feeling obligated to participate in what Election Day has become. Many of us saw our votes this year as being the last bulkhead protecting our democracy from tyranny. This is a positive light in which to see our Election Day, of course, but it is also rather thin gruel compared to what might have been. Rather than going to the polls as an act of participatory democracy in which we engage with our neighbors – all of them – in a peaceful and constructive “marketplace of ideas” and work together to try to create the most representative government possible, this year we casted our ballots mainly to try to prevent a fascist takeover of our government. It remains to be seen, in my opinion, whether we were successful at that. So even here it is hard to find abundant gratitude.

Even with this hardship, I, as your Minister, decided some weeks ago that it would be a good time to hold up gratitude for you – which, as an old saying goes – seemed like a good idea at the time.

But as John Lennon said, life is what happens while you’re making other plans. Not only did we have to live through our national election earlier this month, which for many of us was an anxiety-ridden experience with mixed results, we have also endured a series of national tragedies that has tested our ability to see the world today as something to embrace rather than fear. We’ve seen a government-driven effort to erase our

transgender siblings, the demonization of migrants who dare to walk to the United States in an effort to flee persecution and death, an attempt at the mass assassination of leaders who criticize our nation's president, the murder of two African-Americans at a Kentucky grocery store after the killer couldn't get in to an African-American church because they happened to have locked their doors, and – perhaps most horrific of all, the murder of 11 people killed at prayer in a Pittsburgh synagogue because they were Jewish. Then we saw a gunman open fire at a crowded bar in Thousand Oaks, California – an event also exemplary of the nature of violent tragedies sweeping over our nation yet almost ignored in our media because such events have become commonplace and because extreme wildfires – which are also becoming frighteningly normal – emerged and spread about in its wake.

Where, and how, do we find gratitude in the midst of all this?

I want to pause at this point to acknowledge the obvious. Some of you may have come today hoping to hear an uplifting sermon about gratitude – something that praises the abundance of generosity and love in which we live, words that gladden our hearts as we pause to appreciate all we have. That's what Thanksgiving is all about, right? And if you came here expecting or hoping for that, you may at this point be disappointed, because so far I'm dwelling on stuff that doesn't gladden our hearts. If you are noticing that, I ask that you indulge me as I practice what I was taught by my preaching professor in seminary, the Rev. J. Alfred Smith of Oakland's American Baptist Seminary of the West. He said that all one has to do in a sermon is to give the people some bad news, then give them

some good news, and then give them something to do. That's my intention today, and I'm still on the first leg of that trio of charges.

But before I move out of "bad news" mode and hopefully into some good, I need to acknowledge one other factor that makes offering a sermon on gratitude right now hard for me. It's hard because I'm a person of privilege. I'm a white, cis-gendered, English-speaking, able-bodied, American-born, straight, Christian (by birth) male – and I'm well aware that much of the turmoil going on in our world, much of what I've referenced, does not directly affect me in the same way it does many people who don't fit into all these categories. I'm not only talking about acts of blatant discrimination and bigotry like the shooting at the Synagogue in Pittsburgh, but also about the general social and political climate in our polarizing times. It is people like me – my white brothers mostly and sisters – who not only benefit more directly from the biases and inequalities in our economic and political system, we are also working to maintain or even intensify such imbalances of power. Even if I'm not doing that myself, I still live an experience of one who seldom has to question if others who don't look like me might use their political power against me. That is a profound privilege; one for which I am decidedly *not* grateful. But the more complicated problem is it makes me hesitate before saying anything comforting such as "We need to look at the big picture: there is so much to be grateful for, more than we might think." To which the response might be: Easy for you to say, white guy.

This is all to say that I approach this topic of gratitude with considerable caution, and much humility. Yet I approach it all the same, for to be a whole human I must. We must. We cannot ever not leave room in

our lives for gratitude, no matter how grim our circumstances become. To lose gratitude is, to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King, to approach spiritual death.

This sentiment is well expressed by a saying my daughter came up with recently, which goes “Why do the stars shine? Because they’re surrounded by darkness.” Perhaps we, too, can make our best effort to shine when we’re surrounded by darkness. Indeed, I believe it is precisely at such times when we need to shine the most – shine with our undying faith, love, compassion, and gratitude.

With this in mind, I want to share with you two examples of times I was impressed by another’s gratitude. One was in a woman named Tammy, who I met a couple months ago. I first met her when she showed up at a memorial service we were holding here at UUCY for a homeless man who had recently died in a violent altercation with some other homeless people. The person who organized the service was busy calling or texting many of her friends, many of whom were sleeping or hanging out at various places around the city where people without homes often sleep or hang out. She got a hold of Tammy, who happened to be sleeping on the Northeast stairwell of our church, just outside from where we were gathering. She was one of the few who actually made the trip to the service, presumably because her commute was only a few steps away. Tammy expressed gratitude in a way and with a passion that I don’t often witness. She was ever so grateful that our community was hosting this service for a man many including her called a friend, and she was even more grateful for the chance she had just had to sleep undisturbed for an entire night – even if it was on a wooden stairwell a stone’s throw from a

major arterial. She thanked me and the church profusely, many times. It was natural for her to express her gratitude – harder for me to accept it. (More on that in a minute.)

The other story I'm reminded of is of a neighbor of mine several years ago named Fred. I don't remember the details, but Fred had a son who was born with severe cognitive and brain disabilities. He told me the short version of the story that spanned some fifteen years of nearly constant care, many trips to the hospital for surgeries and tests, and a few near-death experiences. The most recent hospital episode had happened a few years prior, in which his son underwent a risky brain surgery at a Seattle hospital, which turned out to have been mostly successful. Successful in that he didn't die, of course, but also in expanding somewhat his son's ability to function and probably extending his life by several years. Then, sometime later, a routine follow-up in which some imaging was done revealed that the surgical team had accidentally left one of their instruments inside his son's head. This did not, he understood, present an immediate threat to his son's life, but of course had to be taken care of at some point, preferably sooner rather than later. As he told me this part of the story, the first thing that jumped into my mind, which I kept to myself, was that this is exactly the kind of situation for which doctors have malpractice insurance and for which many lawyers would be happy to bring suit. As that thought ran through my head, Fred went on to say that many people he knew – and some he didn't – indeed had urged him to bring suit against the hospital, even though the doctors had already committed to fixing their error at no cost to him. At this point, I saw tears in Fred's eyes

as he told me of his response to these suggestions: “How could I ever sue the guy who saved my son’s life?”

Both Tammy and Fred live with hardships of the like I have not directly experienced, and both of them found ways to live with gratitude in their hearts, and to express that gratitude to others. There is the good news for those who need it – gratitude is always possible. Gratitude is not a scarce commodity – it is not something we have to ration out only in times or circumstances in which we feel entitled to or particularly blessed. Instead, gratitude is about how we respond to life’s challenges. Indeed, it’s a bit like that old saw about how easy it is to be a pacifist in times of peace or a vegetarian between meals – it’s relatively easy, and ultimately pointless, to practice gratitude only in times of abundance. When our situation is most dire is exactly when we need to be grateful the most.

It might be said the opposite of gratitude is fear. The late Benedictine monk David Stendhl-Rast says “It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.” I think that is absolutely true. But it’s even more basic – whether or not being grateful in any given moment brings us joy, I do believe that gratitude at the very least keeps fear at bay, keeps helplessness at bay. To be grateful is to take control of at least one part of your life that you have control over: how you respond. It is, first and foremost, an internal feeling – whether or not it is actually expressed. If I can say only one thing about gratitude it would be this: it is a spiritual practice that begins with a heart that is open to accepting the gifts we may or may not deserve.

It is often said in our culture “It is better to give than to receive.” There may be truth in that, but there is also a downside. This sentiment

reinforces our culture's difficulty with receiving, which for many of us is actually harder to do than to give, the old saw notwithstanding. This difficulty receiving is related, I believe, to the difficulty many of us have to even *ask* for help. As my colleague the Rev. Joe Cleveland wrote: "Even more difficult than receiving... is the actual asking. 'I am in need. I am in trouble. I could really use some help.' I don't know many people who can really do that at all easily."

Perhaps this is an area in which my aforementioned status as a white, cis-gendered, straight male comes into play. We are taught to be self-sufficient, and asking for help in this way implies that we failed or did something wrong. Why else would we need help? Nearly all of us in this culture are taught this in one way or another, and many of us suffer from the delusion that we can make it through anything that comes our way, so why ask for help? But it is not only in matters of life and death that we might be freed to ask for help; it can be with little things, too. Things that sure, we can handle on our own, but why? Why not engage in this beautiful thing called human relationships to enhance our lives?

Rev. Cleveland in his article mentions the musician and writer Amanda Palmer, and quotes from her book "The Art of Asking." She talks about some of the factors that make people hesitant to ask, one of which is power. In her view, there are three different kinds of asking: First, asking for help with shame, which implies "You have power over me." An example of this might be something like "Gee, I really screwed up and you seem to have your act together, so can you find it in your heart to help me out?" Then there's asking with condescension, which suggests "I have power over you." This might sound like "You know, I don't really *need* your help, I

can figure this out on my own, but since you're here and seem intent on interfering in my personal life, you might as well do such and such for me.” Both of these ways of asking are problematic. The third alternative, she says, is to ask for help with gratitude, which says “We have the power to help each other.”

Indeed. We have the power to help each other, if only we have the courage to ask. And to ask we need not grovel in shame, nor shall we gloat with arrogance. Instead, let us be grateful that we are indeed here for one another, and together we can make each other stronger so that we may shine – like the stars – in these dark days. We can be a part of a community of human beings that don't just *assemble*, but actually interact. We can help each other, support each other, hold each other accountable, and trust one another. That is something to be truly grateful for.

If the opposite of gratitude is fear, then I think its complement is generosity – the more grateful we are of gifts we receive, the more generous we can be in our giving. They are not in competition with each other; they are both by-products of a grateful heart and spirit.

So that's the third leg: I'm giving you something to do. And the further good news is it's really not that hard. I'm not telling you to dedicate every free hour of your life to one cause or another, I'm not telling you that you need to walk a thousand miles in another's shoes, or to spend X number of hours working at the homeless shelter or standing vigil at the prison. These are all good things to do, if you can, but first and foremost our task is to simply open our hearts to receiving the goodness and compassion that exist in this world, to be able to recognize that none of us are in this alone and even if our one shining star seems way too dim to

really light the sky, together our stars can shine brilliantly. We can do this for one another in this community inside these walls, and we can do it outside as well.

Most importantly, we can do it together.



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