

Gratitude and You
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Matthew 5:1-11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Last week I attempted to take a concept that we perceive of as simple, and explain it in a new light. The main point that I wanted to make is that **Gratitude is not transactional.**

And I believe that if we can shift the view of gratitude away from transaction --- we can change the world

Unfortunately, that is how most of us experience it.

Most of us see gratitude in a debt/duty type of way

We often think of it in terms of some benefactor giving us a gift

We are the beneficiaries of that gift --- and we are in the benefactor's debt for it

Think of how often we say: I owe you a debt of gratitude

We are in debt until we discharge that debt.

How do we do that --- all kinds of ways

- giving a return gift
- sending a thank-you note
- doing a favor in return

This cycle of reciprocity is so pervasive in our society that we don't even recognize it anymore --- it is just a part of the way things are done.

But it also is hierarchical

Generally you have a benefactor --- who has more resources, maybe even richer --- who then gives a benefit to people who are without the capacity to have those things themselves.

This cycle is very demeaning to people who are in need of our "generosity"

But, this is not the vision of gratitude that the bible presents

In the Bible it is all about abundance and the sharing of gifts for free without any expectation of return --- and the image that the bible loves to use over and over again is one of table fellowship.

In the 14th chapter of Luke there is a great exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees on what it means to be a follower of his.

Jesus is talking with some of the leaders of the Pharisees, and they are discussing table etiquette.

First Jesus talks about where one should sit and he suggests that we should give up the seat of honor and sit in the last place.

And then Jesus makes this rather profound comment.

I am going to share this from The Message (Luke 14:15-24),

The text says Jesus turns to the host of the party and says:

“The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.”

Jesus seems to be destroying the debt/duty understanding of gratitude and gift giving and quite literally says to us --- that we must invite the poor BECAUSE there will not be any payback.

Immediately following that story, Luke gives us the story of the Great Banquet in which we are charged to fill God's table with whomever can be found.

In other words, we are **all** invited --- even though we have no capacity to repay this gift. Because it is a gift --- there is no obligation.

Personal gratitude --- once we move beyond the debt/duty cycle to one of gift and response is fairly easy.

- being more attentive to people around you
- keeping a gratitude journal
- celebrate each day --- as the gift that it is

I could go on and on, there are hundreds of books written all the time about how we can experience gratitude more fully in our lives.

But how do we experience and live out gratitude in the public square?

Diana Butler Bass wants to make clear in her book GRATEFUL, that if gratitude is deployed as a transaction of debt and duty, it will then become a mechanism of control in order to reinforce the structures of injustice.

What she has challenged me to do, and what she is challenging you to do --- is to see gratitude differently.

What if gratitude is put into the context of a communal table?

What if gratitude is understood to exist within a universe of abundance --- where, quoting Wendell Berry "everything we need is here".

The question becomes for us: How do we pass the gift around with no expectation of return to make sure that everyone is fed and everyone is cared for and that everyone has access to the good gifts of all creation?

Think how different the world would be if we lived with an attitude of: How do we steward these gifts? Rather than, How do we control their distribution?

The responsibility of the Christian community (the Church) is to build practices around the understanding of gratitude as table fellowship so that we can create a doorway into grace and gift.

We need to help end the debt/ duty cycle and usher in God's more grace-filled approach to gratitude.

So how do we do this?

How do we shift our attention away from the world's mode of gratitude --- one that is based on debt and duty --- to God's vision of gratitude that is filled with:

- real grace
- real gifts --- with no strings attached
- and authentic response not drawn from obligation but from real gratitude

The key I believe is attention --- attention to anything that draws our eyes toward places where grace and gifts are present in our lives (just a hint --- that is everywhere!)

Robert A. Emmons, is the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude.

He is a professor of psychology at the University of California, at Davis, and is engaged in a long-term research project designed to create and disseminate a large body of novel scientific data on the nature of gratitude, its causes, and its potential consequences for human health and well-being.

His website: Emmons Lab is fascinating.

Along with all kinds of scholarly books, Robert Emmons has a little tiny pocket book that can go anywhere with you called: The Little Book of Gratitude. It offers great tips on how to practice gratitude daily.

Emmonds' offers what he calls the "ARC" model of gratitude:

Gratitude: ***amplifies*** goodness

Gratitude: ***rescues*** us from negative emotions, and

Gratitude: ***connects*** us to others in meaningful ways.

Amplify, rescue, connect

But following this does not make it easy --- it just helps us have tools along the way.

Mary Jo Leddy in her book Radical Gratitude offers ten "habits of being that can help us live with spirit . . . in dispirited time and place."

Her ten habits are:

1. Begin before you are ready.
Take baby steps
"Beginning steps in gratitude do not have to be great or grand.

2. Practice gratitude
 - They need only be real"
 - Prayers
 - Chants
 - Reflections (journals)
 - Meditation
3. Gather with like spirited people
 - Find or create a group that is willing to be committed to practicing gratefulness as a way of life
4. Live more simply
 - Let go of material things that burden you
5. Look for good examples to emulate
 - Learn from people who have figured this out
 - We all have grateful people in our lives, they can teach us a lot!
6. Think with the Mind of Your Heart
 - Trust your feeling of gratefulness and your longing for a better way of life.
7. See from the Center and the Edge
 - See differently --- develop "soft eyes"
 - eyes that see nuance, eyes that are less judgmental
8. Be Connected to a longer Tradition, a Wider Community
 - Go deeper in your spiritual walk and learn from the masters of the past
9. Find a Beloved Community
 - Get involved in your community --- truly commit to it
10. Contemplate the Face of the World
 - Gratitude empowers us to stare at reality and overcome what is challenging, violent, and evil.
 - Do not turn away from the world, turn toward it.

You don't need to do all ten things --- but you must do number one BEGIN

Bass writes:

Leddy's list is a hinge between personal and public practices of gratitude, but if we want to create a politics of gratitude, we need to develop specific practices for shaping our common life. If it is difficult to live gratefully as individuals, achieving a communal sense of gratitude will challenge us in profound ways.

Bass goes on and quotes from Robert Christian, a young Roman Catholic ethicist as he was explaining the Golden Rule in an article called *The Politics of Gratitude*.

The politics of gratitude necessarily leads to a focus on the common good and a *whole life* commitment to securing conditions that reflect the worth and dignity of all. It leads one to affirm the universal destination of goods --- the recognition that the goods of creation "are destined for the whole human race." One's claim to such goods, to one's most basic needs, is just as legitimate if one is an orphan in the Democratic Republic of Congo as if one is born to a Senator or CEO in one of the wealthy enclaves of the United States.

What a powerful political description of gift and response gratitude when he wrote: goods of creation "are destined for the whole human race.

The question is how can we move toward practicing generosity in community?

Bass offers two suggestions.

First, those beloved communities that we are engaged and committed to --- that Leddy talked about --- we need to focus on gratitude as a community.

What would it look like if we focused only on GRATITUDE?

What if we started every meeting, every class, every small group by sharing a few minutes of gratitude?

What if school boards did that? Or City Councils?

What if businesses emphasized how grateful they were for their employees and their customers? That is what we saw happening Thursday night at the Holiday Block Party

The simple truth is; we cannot create a politics of gratitude if we fail to practice it together.

Where else to begin but in our schools, our work places, and our churches?

Secondly, Bass suggests that we need to frame a new political language.

Too much of our political language is in the form of debt and duty.

"Entitlements" is the very antithesis of gratitude, and it provokes sharp, competitive feelings between citizens. Far better is a language of "benefit." We --- all of us --- can, should, and do benefit from the goods of public resources and economic growth (like education, transportation, and clean air and water.) We need to recognize that our lives are profoundly dependent upon goods and gifts that others created and, in some way, shared. We all receive, and we all give. No one is only a "taker" or a "maker." (p. 191)

Ann Fleming Tannehill sent me an article from the Wall Street Journal this week written by A.J. Jacobs.

He started his piece by saying:

I recently had the opportunity to gaze at one of the most mind-boggling accomplishments in history. This marvel is the result of thousands of human beings collaborating across dozens of countries. It required the combined labor of artists, biologists, politicians, mechanics, miners and goatherds. It took airplanes, boats, trucks, motorcycles, vans, pallets and shoulders. It depended on a vast range of materials, from steel and wood to explosives and bat guano. It relied on ancient wisdom and space-age technology, on freezing temperatures and scorching heat.

It is my morning cup of coffee.

His son, for some reason dared him to thank everyone who helped bring about his coffee.

I pledged to thank every person who had even the smallest role in making my cup of coffee a reality: the barista, the farmer and everyone in between.

Some were easy and obvious to thank -- the barista, the farmer --- but as he got thinking about it, there were thousands of people --- the everyone in between --- who brought him his cup of morning Joe.

He traveled to Brazil, and New York City --- he even visited NorthWest Indiana to thank the steel workers who made the steel for the coffee machines.

What he realized is that we are all interconnected and all need each other.
And ultimately that everything is a gift of one form or another.

I don't know if you noticed the quote at the top of the bulletin. It is from Albert Schweitzer.
"The greatest thing is to give thanks for everything.
He who has learned this knows what it means to live.
He has penetrated the whole mystery of life: giving thanks for everything."

I think Schweitzer figured it out.
To learn gratitude is to know the "mystery" of life.

However, he makes a huge mistake in the bible verse he alludes to.

We are not called to give thanks FOR all things, rather we are called to give thanks IN all things.
That is a huge difference.

We don't give thanks for evil or injustice, for violence or hatred.
But we give thanks that despite the evils, God is with us showing us --- inviting us --- to a better way.

I chose the Beatitudes to be the text this morning, and I did so for a simple reason. I wanted to start with something that sets the table for gratitude.

Come to the table
All are welcome
All are invited
There is a place for you!
Give Thanks!

Diana Butler Bass concludes her book with this Thanksgiving Prayer that I want to share with you and end with this morning.

Let us pray:
God, there are days we do not feel grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak, confusing. God, we struggle to feel grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we choose gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, grateful for their stories and struggles, and we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating and accepting them for who they are. We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted, whatever our differences, or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the stage of the future of humankind and creation.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks. We choose it. We will make this choice of thanks with courageous hearts, knowing that it is humbling to say "thank you." We choose to see your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we all are guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received. We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we choose grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere. In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude onto the world.

Thus, with you, and with all those gathered at this table, we pledge to make thanks. We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future. Around our family table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.

We choose thanks.

Amen.