



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
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Gratitude

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The Church in the Circle
199 Duke of Gloucester Street
Annapolis, Maryland 21401**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 2010**

I want to begin this morning with an old religious joke. You may have heard this one before. I kind of like it. It goes like this. A devout, old grandmother is watching her grandson playing on the beach when a huge wave comes and sweeps him out to sea. The grandmother, horrified, falls to her knees and prays, "Please God, save my only grandson. He had his whole life before him. I beg of you, please, bring him back." Just then a big wave comes and washes the boy back onto the beach as good as new. The grandmother looks at the boy for a long time and then she looks up to heaven, and then she looks at the boy again, and then she looks up to heaven again, and says, "I don't mean to sound ungrateful Lord, but he was wearing a hat!"

Well, it's Thanksgiving so this morning I want to talk about gratitude. What's interesting is that gratitude or the lack thereof is not just the subject of jokes, it has also become something of a hot topic among psychologists and neuroscientists recently. And what's really interesting, I think, is that the research is showing that gratitude is good for you. It seems as though gratitude has a number of positive benefits: grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. Here are some results given by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough:

- People who kept a gratitude journal on a weekly basis, compared to members of a control group, ended up exercising more regularly, reported fewer physical ailments, felt better about their lives as a whole, were more optimistic about the upcoming week, and were more likely to reach their personal goals
- In a 21-day study of people with neuromuscular diseases, those who practiced gratitude felt more energy, more connected to others, slept better and were more optimistic
- People who regularly attend religious services and engage in spiritual activities are more likely to be grateful, feel more interconnected to all life and express more responsibility to

others

- Children who practice grateful thinking have more positive attitudes toward school and their families.

Pretty interesting stuff. We have some scientific evidence which shows that gratitude and the practice of gratitude has positive benefits. But Emmons notes grateful people do not take a Pollyannaish view of the world. He says, “To say we feel grateful is not to say that everything in our lives is necessarily great. It just means we are aware of our blessings. If you only think about your disappointments and unsatisfied wants, you may be prone to unhappiness. If you’re fully aware of your disappointments, but, at the same time, thankful for the good that has happened and for your chance to live, you may show higher indices of well-being.”

So gratitude is good for us. Grateful people report higher levels of well-being and grateful people are reported to be more generous and helpful to others.

Perhaps what we are getting is some empirical verification for what philosophers and religious teachers have been telling us for some time. Cicero said, “There is no quality I would rather have, and be thought to have, than gratitude. For it is not only the greatest virtue, but is the mother of all the rest.” Meister Eckhart famously said, “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” And our Psalm appointed for today says, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise.” Our Psalmist is telling us that the way to approach God is with thanksgiving and praise. How do we draw near to God? “Give thanks to him and call upon his name.”

Thanksgiving does seem to be a fundamental way in which we pray, a fundamental way we draw near to God. Anne Lamott once said that there are really only two types of prayers: “Please, please, please, please, please” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.” I think there are more than two, but she certainly has named two of the most important. “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, go into his courts with praise.” Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Now, I want to go one step further and say that thanksgiving is not only good for you, and not only a fundamental way of prayer, but that it is really basic to the shape of the religious life. I really think that the religious life can be summed up by saying that our chief end and purpose is to glorify God and to lead lives of grateful service. Glorify God, love him with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and out of that love be freed for a life of grateful service, freed to love our neighbor as ourselves. We don’t have to earn God’s love or do anything to deserve God’s love. God’s love for us comes first. God’s love for us is unconditional. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” All love, all gift, the bread of life given to us free of charge. The only thing we need to do is to accept that love, accept the fact that despite our frailty and failings God loves us anyway. It seems to me that that is the heart of the Gospel, the good news. We thank God for his unconditional love and in gratitude we try to show something of that love to others. Not in order to earn God’s love or to get anything in return. We do it simply in thanksgiving. “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, go into his courts with praise.” Thank you, thank you, thank you.

A life of thanksgiving does seem to lie at the heart of the religious life. I don’t think this is a Polyannish view of the world. Sometimes we will pray, “please, please, please, please, please.” It just means that despite the challenges and pain of life, we are also aware of our blessings. Today, many of us will gather with family and friends for Thanksgiving dinner. Now, I can’t speak for anyone’s family but my own, but Lord knows gatherings with my family are anything but perfect. There are people who are taken for granted and there are petty squabbles

and there is usually a grandmother, who when you tell her how great the turkey is, says something like, "Eh! It's little too dry." More seriously there are loved ones who are far away and God rest their souls there are loved ones who have died. And yet, and yet, despite the challenges and losses, real as they may be, we gather together with family and friends to say thank you to God for all the real blessings we have received. Real blessings like life and love and family and friends; like turkey and stuffing and apple pie; real blessings like the goodness of the Lord, God's everlasting mercy, and the free gift of the bread of life. For these good things we gather together to say thank you: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his mercy is everlasting; and his faithfulness endures from age to age."

The English writer, Beverly Nichols, experienced gratitude in his garden. He says, "It was inevitable, I suppose, that in the garden I should begin, at long last, to ask myself what lay behind all this beauty. When guests were gone and I had the flowers all to myself, I was so happy that I wondered why at the same time I was haunted by a sense of emptiness. It was as though I wanted to thank somebody, but had nobody to thank; which is another way of saying that I felt the need for worship. That is, perhaps, the kindest way in which a person may come to his or her God. There is an interminable literature on the origins of the religious impulse, but to me it is simpler than that. It is summed up in the image of a person at sundown, watching the crimson flowering of the sky and saying--to somebody--"Thank you.""

.Enter his gates with thanksgiving, go into his courts with praise; give thanks to him and call upon his name.

This may not only be good advice. Studies show that it may be good for you.

Happy Thanksgiving!