

**THE RHYTHM OF GRATITUDE**  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Psalm 107: 1 – 6 (NIV)**

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed Of the Lord say this – those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south. Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. They cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.**

We will celebrate Thanksgiving this Thursday. Already we have entered the “Holiday season” which no longer distinguishes Thanksgiving, Advent, Hanukkah, and Christmas. At Starbucks you can purchase the seasonal “Christmas” blend. But if you are Jewish, don’t worry. You can purchase the “Holiday” blend, which is the exact same recipe as the Christmas blend, just more socially and religiously correct. The department stores have not been able to restrain themselves from displays of the Claus, wreaths, lights, and trees.

The first Pilgrims and Puritans who arrived in North America saw a coastline so dense with trees it looked like an

impenetrable black wall. Their imaginations conjured up all kinds of frightening beasts. They were much more frightened than they were thankful, even after the largess of the Native American Indians who taught them about the three sisters – corn, squash, and beans.

For many people Thanksgiving Day and the weekend that follows is little more than an extended holiday that might include visits with their extended family, food and more food, or extreme shopping on “Black Friday.”

Thanksgiving both acknowledges the work of human hands and the providence that supplies them. Consider the harvest hymn by Matthias Claudius, “We Plow the Fields and Scatter:”

We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,  
But it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand.  
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,  
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft, refreshing rain.

He only is the maker of all things near and far;  
He paints the wayside flower, He lights the evening star.  
The winds and waves obey him, by Him the birds are fed;  
Much more, to us his children, He gives our daily bread.

We thank thee, then, O Father, for all things bright and good:

The seedtime and the harvest, our life, our health, our food.  
Accept the gifts we offer, for all thy love imparts,  
And, what thou most desirest, our humble thankful hearts.

Like most prayers and hymns of thanksgiving we begin with an inventory. Thanksgiving is taking stock of the gifts of life. Gratitude begins with an inventory of the obvious: flowers, trees, seed, soil, rain, and warmth; hands for planting and harvesting and cooking.

It is sad to me that today Thanksgiving is not creating a list of all that we can be thankful for. Rather, we create the lists of Christmas wants or the lists of who has been naughty and nice. Children and grandchildren send emails with gift expectations or even demands. We are inundated with holiday hopes from more charities than we can possibly support and we often feel inadequate or guilty.

People keep other lists too. Folks have a list of hurts, slights, and wounds. Some have lists of all that they have lost in life or what has been taken from them. Yet others keep a roster of how things should be if only they were left in charge. These folks are quick to judge and often feel

cheated. They are only conscious of what needs to be improved or perfected.

Some people measure their love by the quantity of their gifts. It is like the child who rushes into the living room on Christmas morning. A mountain of gifts surrounds the Christmas tree. The child wades into the packages and rips the wrapping off of every present with his name on it. After a half an hour of frenzied hunting and tearing he comes to the end of his search. He looks at his parents and asks, "Is that all there is?"

In my experience people who keep these kinds of lists are very unhappy people. Their memory is overwhelmed with life's disappointments and those who have failed them. They are bitter and angry and the holiday season is only a reminder of what they have lost or what they have never had.

In a culture that is increasingly defined by what we own and how much we possess we seldom take the time to appreciate what we can be thankful for. That is true in our personal lives and families, in our churches and

communities. We no longer know how to appreciate the bounty that surrounds us every day. Because we are constantly wondering what we can get we cannot be thankful for what we have.

A soul without gratitude is vacuous. It only sees what it can absorb, acquire or take.

William Arthur Ward commented, "God gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds a day. Have you used one of them to say "thank you?"

My point is that we cannot say "thank you" if we are not conscious of what has been given to us in the first place. And because fewer families today offer a prayer of thanks before the common meal it does not even occur to our children to be aware of the gift they have been go generously blessed with and turn their hearts to appreciation.

The rhythm of gratitude begins with taking stock of the joys that we encountered throughout the day; the gestures of love and respect that were tendered to us; the funny story that someone told at work; the surprises that came our way; the new thing we learned or the new skill we acquired; and

the simple gifts of food, water, and shelter. Imagine yourself alone or with friends and family asking a simple question: “Name one good thing that happened to you today.” Or, “What was the best part of your day?” I often ask my children, “Did you slay any dragons today?” I ask that because kids are constantly fighting dragons. For some kids it’s the school bully, their out of fashion blue jeans, or the temptation of drugs. For me it was algebra. To meet the dragon and live is often a huge gift of life.

Do you remember that old gospel song, “Count your blessings?” You recall the chorus of “Count your blessing, name them one by one, count your many blessings see what God has done. Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings see what God has done.” And do you remember the first stanza? “When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed. When you are discouraged thinking all is lost.” The assumption here is that there are billows that will toss us around. There are times when we are discouraged thinking all is lost. There will be dragons.

And one of the ways that we survive billows and despair is counting the blessings.

If we do not know what our gifts are we will not have the tools to meet the challenges of life and death. We will not acquire an understanding of the rhythm of life's give and take. We will not see the ebb and flow of life and death. We will not see the balance of life and darkness. We require a rhythm of gratitude if we are going to meet the stress of life. And the first ingredient of gratitude is an awareness of our life's bounty.

Gratitude leads us to thankfulness. From an awareness of the many gifts that regularly flow through our day we move to the act of giving thanks. We recognize that all the we have is finally a gift that was prepared for, built by, and given to us. That does not mean that we should ignore our talents and hard work. This room is filled with women and men who made the determination to acquire the education that would need. Some of us worked our way through college and graduate school. Most of us paid our dues to the years of experience or trial and error that gave

us the competency to be the best in our field. Some of us have paid dearly for the risks we took in product development or financial investment to see those risks rise to incredible success and or failure. We have worked the late hours and sacrificed our health or our families to arrive at some measure of reward.

I am reminded of the movie *Shenandoah*, starring Jimmy Stewart. His family has gathered around the table board and he offers a prayer something like this: “Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, we planted it, and we harvested it. But thank you anyway.” I am sure that many of us feel the same way.

But if we are honest with ourselves life did not start when we were conceived. Natural resources were planted long before we picked them up. Foundations in science and technology did not wait for our generation to graduate from college. There is a providence beyond our minds and hands that has gifted us with immeasurable bounty. Without such bounty our hard work would have never paid off and we would not have amounted to much.

It does not matter much whether you call this God, the Creator, the Source, or Albert Einstein's preference, "The Mystery." In fact Einstein wrote:

"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man."<sup>1</sup>

Can we set aside all of the epistemological challenges that we have with the orthodox and anthropomorphic God and see the intricate nature of the universe? Can we see the delicate and finely tuned connection that binds us all together? All of us? Plant, mineral, chemical, gas, protein, and animal? Dare we see that this is the Being in whom we live and move and have our being? How can we not? How can we not see it and say, "Wow! Thank you!"

Mary Oliver wrote "Look and See:"

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Walter Isaacson, "Einstein and Faith," *Time*, April 16, 2007.

“This morning, at waterside, a sparrow flew to a water rock and landed, by error on the back of an eider duck; lightly it fluttered off, amused. The duck to was not provoked, but you might say, was Laughing.

This afternoon a gull sailing over our house was casually scratching its stomach of white feathers with one pink foot as it flew.

O Lord, how shining and festive is your gift to us, if we only look and see.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe that this is the heart of Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is seeing, observing, and taking inventory of the bounty with which we have been blessed. Thanksgiving is a rhythm of inventory and gratitude that we build into the 86,400 seconds of a day. Thanksgiving is the awe of mystery that surrounds our going out and our coming in. Thanksgiving is not a theological discussion but the way of marvel in our relationships throughout the universe.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “Look and See,” *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 26.