

## THANKSGIVING

***You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of God, who has dealt wondrously with you.*** Joel 2: 25

I've thought a good deal about gratitude lately. Of course it's a timely topic, given Thanksgiving, but gratitude has been in my heart otherwise,

Gratitude is an interesting – what? Is gratitude an emotion? An attitude? I say that I've been thinking about gratitude, pondering gratitude, but I've also been feeling gratitude – and feeling the lack of it, in some instances, as well.

I've decided, provisionally, that gratitude, like faith, has different dimensions. Certainly, gratitude is a feeling, an emotion. When I spend time in Maine, particularly when I am at the ocean, I am filled with greatfulness – gratitude toward my parents, who had the wisdom to make their home in this very special, beautiful part of the world. And gratitude to the God who created the splendor of the natural world.

At such times, gratitude comes over me, overwhelms me with feeling. At such times, gratitude is a gift. Gratitude, like faith, is bestowed upon me. It comes freely, like grace – in fact, it is grace, I would say – the keen awareness of God's presence, God's goodness, God's generous activity in the world.

Another time when I quite predictably feel gratitude is when I come over to this church for a service, particularly on Sunday mornings. I feel glad anticipation for the energy and goodwill and faithfulness that I will encounter, the friends old and new who I'll see, the commitment and creativity of the ministers of every variety who work together to make our worshipping community the vibrant, holy place it is. Gratitude fills my heart – a profound emotion, a gift.

But I believe that gratitude is also a practice, a discipline, an attitude that can be cultivated, developed, and deepened. In this way, too, gratitude resembles faith. I have said here more than once that for me, faith is a gift. I have never doubted God: God's existence, God's goodness, God's passion for justice. That faith is a gift– I have it, many people don't. My gift of faith doesn't make me superior to anyone who struggles with deep doubt or skepticism about God; my gift just makes me blessed with a certain peace of mind and heart.

But the practice of faith, or faithfulness, is another matter. What I feel about God is only the beginning. How I act about that feeling is another matter. Faithfulness, the

practice of faith, is indeed a practice, a discipline, a lifelong commitment. Faithfulness requires vigilance, cultivation, and nurture.

And so it is with gratitude. We can *feel* gratitude, but we can also practice it. We can, I believe, learn to be more grateful, more deeply, and more often. We can cultivate mindfulness about the gifts we have been given. We can become more intentional about noticing, remembering, and expressing – to ourselves, to others, and to God, the many blessings that grace our lives.

Thanksgiving is many Americans' favorite holiday; I think because it is not the observance of a particular religion, and it's not an excessively patriotic holiday. It's a holiday for believers and non-believers, for nationalistic zealots and pacifists alike.

This is not to say that plenty of arguments don't occur around Thanksgiving tables. But really, it's a shame they do. A friend told me yesterday that she was hoping for a "dynamic free" Thanksgiving. That's probably a lot to hope for.

But what we can hope for, what we can pray and practice for, is a Thanksgiving where the reigning dynamic is gratitude. As Jim Carroll said in his splendid column in yesterday's Globe,

The overflowing banquet table is nothing if not worldly, gloriously so. Giving thanks to and for the ones with whom we gather is thus a profoundly secular act. But the great religions all say that such rare heartiness is enough - that loving gratefulness among humans is the only thanks that God ever wanted in the first place.

*Loving gratefulness among humans is the only thanks that God ever wanted in the first place. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen*

