

## Wild Gratitude

Matthew 11: 25-26      I Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Thanksgiving: I love this holiday. Many friends tell me it is their favorite. Even our unhappy nation gets happy this day. The Episcopal theologian Robert Farrar Capon writes:

Thanksgiving is the only national liturgy we still have—the only day on which the great ominus-gatherum that is the American people does the same thing at the same time... On thanksgiving...we are one, not just in theory but in practice. The same rivers of brown gravy flow over the same mashed potatoes regardless of creed or national origin. The same intractable bird is carved with the same untidy results on the tables of black and white, rich and poor.

Gratitude is one of our purest graces. When we are feeling thankful it is harder for lesser, meaner thought to creep in. So today, a sermon in praise of gratitude.

Recently I was writing the acknowledgments page for my newest book which will come out next spring. I thanked Sue and Grace Baptist to whom I have dedicated the book. It was so fun after all the work of writing the book to give thanks.

There are two acknowledgments pages which I have especially loved. The first is by Harvard's Robert Coles in his book *Harvard Diary*, which broke suddenly, unexpectedly into prayer. He wrote:

A last brief remark: a diary bespeaks one's everyday life, its inevitable ups and downs, its victories and defeats. Lord, I thank you for the presence in my life of my wife Jane, and our children Bob, Denny, Mike—and so the dedication.<sup>1</sup>

“Lord, I thank you.” There in the acknowledgements page!

And here is my all-time favorite by art historian Leo Steinberg. He thanks a raft of people, then concludes:

Re-reading the above I marvel at the persona engendered by the influence of the form. The writer presents himself as one surrounded and cushioned by friends. He is he says “Blessed”, “in luck”, “serene” even in his obligations. Not a word about grievances or about offenses received and inflicted. Who would suspect a curmudgeon behind such handsome

avowals? But perhaps this is what they are good for. By their virtue, ill-humor is temporarily purged, and the author is given a glimpse of the person he might have become had he formed the habit of privately closing each day with such notations as are called for by the publishing of acknowledgments. <sup>2</sup>

What better people we might become, and more joyous, if we paused every night to list our thanksgivings, to remember all who have helped us through that day, and through our life.

### III

We began worship today reading the words of Psalm 103:

Bless the Lord, O my soul

and all that is within me

bless God's holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul

and forget not all God's benefits.

Then the psalmist begins to list them:

forgiveness

healing

mercy

rescue from the Pit (ever been in a pit?)

the work of justice

and the steadfast love of God.

Yes, bless the Lord, O my soul.

The poet Denise Levertov says that in our broken world we need the poetry of protest in the face of a world of injustice and cruelty. But we also, need the poetry of praise, for our world is also beautiful. “So sing awe”, she writes, “breathe out raise and celebration.”<sup>3</sup> So we do today.

One of my favorite books of poetry is by Mark Van Doren, who taught at Columbia University in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In it there are a number of contemporary psalms. Here is his “Psalm 3.” He begins by looking at the night sky:

Praise Orion and The Great Bear

Praise icy Sirius so burning blue,

Praise the slow dawn, but then the razor rim

Of sun that in another hour

Cannot be looked at lest it blind you; praise

Mountaintops, praise valleys, praise the silver

Streams that circle towns; praise people's houses;  
Praise sitting cats that wait for the door to open;  
Praise running dogs, praise women, men;...  
Praise him because he is, because he has  
His being where no eye, no ear can follow,  
No mind say whence or whither,  
Yet he is, and nothing else is  
Save as witness to his wonder,  
Save as hungering to praise him--  
Let all things, then, great or little,  
Praise him, praise him  
Without end. <sup>4</sup>

Bless the Lord, O my soul!

How would you begin your psalm of praise and thanksgiving today?

I thank you Lord

For jonquils splashing spring with yellow

For that first cup of coffee in the morning

For the smell of clothes hung out to dry in the sun.

For the smell of freshly turned earth.

For the sight of your children home for the holidays.

For memories of holiday tables with those you loved and who have loved you.

For all the ways you, O Lord, have come to save me.

In a movie from years ago, whose name I have forgotten—this is happening more and more these days—the lead character is James Earl Jones, the great black actor, who plays a military man. At one point he says that God saved him three times in his life. The first time God came to save him was when he was a boy and both parents had died, and God sent him his aunt and uncle who took him in and raised him as their own. The second time God saved him was when he was 18 and the army took him in and gave him, a young black man, an education and career he would not have had otherwise. The third time God saved him, he said, was when God sent him his wife.

Bless the Lord, O my soul

and all that is within me

bless God's holy name

Bless the Lord, O my soul

and forget not all God's benefits.

## III

I think of Jesus and his wild ecstatic gratitude. Look at the flowers, he said, the wild flowers of the field. Look at the birds of the air!

These words came alive to me when I traveled to his boyhood home and saw hills and meadows leading down to the Sea of Galilee strewn with the most beautiful wild flowers. Jesus grew up in God's beautiful world and never forgot.

The phrase "wild gratitude" comes from a poem by Edward Hirsch.<sup>5</sup> It describes the British poet Christopher Smart. He was considered insane, but he wrote the most beautiful words to God. He, as Hirsch describes him

...wanted to kneel down and pray without ceasing

In every one of the splintered London streets,

And was locked away in the madhouse of St. Lukes'

With his sad mania, and his wild gratitude

And his grave prayers for other lunatics

And his great love for his speckled cat Jeoffry.

Christopher Smart's poem of August 13, 1759, blessed the Postmaster General "and all conveyencers of letters", and blessed gardeners for their... "intricate

knowledge of flowers”, and milkmen—how he loved to hear the “soft clink of milk bottles” as they were delivered outside the front door. And he called his cat Jeffry “servant of the living God duly and daily serving Him” (Have you noticed I’ve praised both cats and dogs in this sermon?)

I think of how Jesus took bread and cup and thanked God—even that final meal.

Which brings me to the astonishing prayer of thanksgiving Jesus prayed when he realized the tide had turned against him. The religious leaders and political power brokers had turned against him, and the “little people” were turning to him. He knew death was not far away, but this is how he prayed:

I thank you, *Abba*,

Lord of heaven and earth,

That you have hidden these things

From the wise and learned

And revealed them to the little ones.

Yes, *Abba*, such was your gracious will.

He had this most amazing trust in God, that even though the tide had turned against him, god would win the final victory. And *thanks* was what he prayed? It’s



like the words of the great hymn, “This Is My Father’s World”: “Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

Martin Luther King Jr. had such faith, even in the face of violent opposition. “Let us realize”, he said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I recently heard of a justice group who call themselves “Arc Benders”. I’m with them!

#### IV

And I think of the Apostle Paul who himself faced great opposition as he carried the gospel across the Mediterranean world, and said:

Rejoice always

Pray without ceasing,

Give thanks in all circumstances.

Note, he did not say, “Give thanks *for* all circumstances”, but *in* all circumstances. This is what I’d call “wild gratitude”. John Claypool, my predecessor at two churches told of visiting a older man in the hospital. The man said, “Preacher, I’ve only got two teeth, but Praise God, they meet!”

Anne Lamotte wrote a book entitled “Hallelujah Anyway.”<sup>6</sup> The phrase comes from a gospel song by Candi Staton. “You may not feel like it”, the song

goes, “Say Hallelujah Anyway”. Today may be like the children’s book “Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” Say Hallelujah Anyway.

1. Robert Coles, *Harvard Diary* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1988), p. 4
2. Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.x.
3. Denise Levertov, “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival”, *New and Selected Essays* (N.Y.: A New Directions Book, 1992), pp. 143-153.
4. Mark Van Doren, *That Shining Place: New Poems by Mark Van Doren* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1969), p.73
5. Edward Hirsch, “Wild Gratitude” in *Wild Gratitude* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p.17
6. Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* (N.Y.: Riverhead Books, 2017), p. 11.