

November 23, 2003
The Reign of Christ/Thanksgiving Sunday
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Practicing Thanksgiving

Philippians 4:4-14 *...for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.*

Just to be is a blessing.

Just to live is holy. --Abraham Joshua Heschel

In the Christian calendar, today is called Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the liturgical cycle, before we begin once more with Advent. To avoid all the domination overtones of “kingship,” it would be better to think of this as the Realm of God Sunday. The dawning and fulfillment of God’s realm, the new creation was at the center of Jesus’ life and teachings. The living Christ calls us to live in this realm of God.

This is also Thanksgiving Sunday, derived from a romanticized view of our nation’s history. The hospitality of Native Americans is right. But we overlook the genocide our European forebears visited upon the native peoples of this land.

I wondered how these two things could be brought together in a fruitful way—thanksgiving and the Realm of God. Living thankfully is a response to what life truly is—our own lives and the life of the creation that sustains, nourishes, and delights us, all the gift of God. Life itself is a manifestation of grace. So much of our spiritual, psychological, and emotional illness, I think, comes from being out of touch with the grace that permeates all of life. We become plagued by obligation, guilt, or perfectionism. However, when we are living out of gratitude, when our fundamental view of life is grounded in grace—life as gift--then we are already living in the Realm of God. The kingdom has already come.

I departed from the lectionary this morning so that we could listen to Paul’s words in the Letter to the Philippians. Paul was in prison in Rome because of his work on behalf of the Gospel. The church at Philippi had sent him a gift to let him know that he was not forgotten. So Paul wrote a “thank you” note that found its way into our scriptures as the Letter to the Philippians.

The passage we heard this morning comes toward the end of the letter. Paul expresses his gratitude for the gift. But he uses the occasion of the gift to talk about the deeper source of his thankfulness and contentment. He wants his friends to know about the faith that sustains him. Listen to his words again:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me...Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of being in need. I can do all things through God who strengthens me.

Paul begins by saying thanks for the physical gift. He then moves to a deeper thanksgiving. It arises from the profound contentment he has found. It comes from a life fully aware of God and God’s care. It is a contentment beyond the shifting circumstances of life--this moment good, the next terrible, and so forth. Thanksgiving and contentment

go together. A thankful spirit recognizes that we have all that we truly need. A contented spirit gives birth to a life with gratitude at its core.

I think that there exists today a pervasive spirit of discontent. We are immersed in a culture that worships material prosperity. We measure the worth of our lives by how much we accumulate—wealth, recognition, achievements, rewards, and the like. This kind of acquisitive spirit drives out contentment and creates anxiety. If we pin our happiness on wanting more or wanting things to be always different, we can never accept life as it is. We can never accept ourselves as those created and cherished by God.

Years ago, a friend and I were at a retreat for ministers at a beautiful state park in Kentucky. We took a walk together to clear our heads from the sessions in which we had sat all morning. Soon we were standing on a bluff overlooking a sparkling blue lake, surrounded by trees ablaze with autumn colors. The beauty and grace of that sunlit autumn afternoon washed over us, reducing us to sublime silence. It was contentment and thanksgiving rolled into one, the simple, unshakable sense of being at peace with life, with the world, with oneself.

Then, looking down at the lake, my friend broke the silence. “If we only had a boat!” We looked at each other and burst out laughing. Simultaneously we realized the absurdity of his comment. Was it not enough to be bathed in that glorious autumn afternoon, embraced by all the gracious beauty the world has to offer? In a humorous way, we had touched on a major spiritual illness of our time—the spirit of discontent that keeps us from living thankful, and consequently generous, lives.

One day I was having lunch with Rabbi Morris Shapiro. I fell into complaining about this or that as we talked about our work. When I finished my “discourse of discontentment,” Rabbi Shapiro leaned forward a bit and said in a gently chastening rabbinical way: “My friend, you must learn to accept the world as it is, not as you want it to be.”

There is so much wrong with our world. We are called by Christ to give ourselves to making the world better, more peaceful and healthful, more compassionate and just. But we can become obsessed with all that is wrong, finding fault with everything and everyone, including ourselves. We want the world to be as we want it, not as it is. We need to remember Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s beautiful words: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

At the core of our faith is the Good News of God’s presence in Christ, God’s profound acceptance of the world as it is, God’s good, though wounded, creation. What does that most famous verse from John’s gospel say? “For God so LOVED the world that God have his only Son.” God so LOVED the world, a world that is a mixture of good and evil, beauty and ugliness; a world full of people like ourselves who are generous and greedy, self-giving and self-centered, capable of great kindness and of great cruelty. God begins with unconditional acceptance of the world and of us, then moves on to love us into wholeness. To have this love, the very love of God, toward others, the world, and ourselves is to know contentment and thankfulness.

But what about times when life becomes full of pain and difficulty? How can we be thankful and content in the midst of suffering, our own or that of the world? Here we touch the deepest mystery and truth of our faith, that even in the throes of distress and perplexity, of loss and deprivation, we can find a song of thanksgiving to God in our souls.

Remember that Paul was in prison when he wrote his “thank you” letter to the Philippian Christians. He was facing his own death at the hands of Rome. And yet, he

could say that he was content. He could express confidence that he could face anything because of God who strengthened him. Paul had entrusted his life completely to God, not to the circumstances in which he found himself at any particular moment—good fortune or bad, acceptance or rejection, comfort or suffering. Such faith arises in us when we move deeper and deeper into our communion with God. Such faith doesn't come quickly or easily, but it does come by God's grace and our own seeking of a more contented, peaceful spirit.

In the last weeks of my mother's life, she was in and out of the hospital with congestive heart failure. Her eyesight was nearly gone. One evening as I was about to leave her hospital room, I looked at her sitting there in the gathering darkness. "Mom, does it bother you to sit here at night in the darkness?" "No," she said after a pause. "It is a good time for me. I sit here and think about so many experiences in my life, so many people. I actually enjoy this time." I was amazed and thought about this for a long time. This had not come to her suddenly, this capacity for being content within herself even while she was moving through debilitation toward death. I remembered how she would sit each day in her oak rocking chair by the window, reading the Bible, then a book of daily meditations. Then she would sit in silence, the kind of praying that goes beyond words, the communion of our inner life with God. Years of this spiritual practice prepared my mother to face deteriorating health and her death with a spirit of contentment and thankfulness.

Practicing thanksgiving and contentment not only equips us to face the most difficult of experiences with a measure of peacefulness and hope, but also is a radical expression of Christian faith. When we are finding contentment in life as God's completely adequate gift to us, when we are living thankfully whether we have much or little, then the dominant values that surround us have no claim on us. We aren't at the mercy of a culture that seeks to instill in us desires for all sorts of things that we don't need and are not good for us or the world. Knowing that our lives are already abundant, we can resist the squandering of money, time and energy on things that do not enrich life, that only drain our material and spiritual resources. When we are practicing thanksgiving to God for the whole world and all its people, God's good creation, then we resist the false voices that would lure us into nationalism and violence and the greed that violates both the creation and God's children everywhere.

In a few moments we will sing one of the most beloved hymns of the church. It is a hymn of thanksgiving written by the German pastor Martin Rinkart, who lived in the seventeenth century, during the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). He was the only pastor left in the town of Eilenburg as it suffered the ravages of war and disease. At one point Rinkart conducted forty to fifty funerals each day. It was during this worst of times that Rinkart wrote these words as a table grace for his family. The simplicity and heart-felt thankfulness stand in awesome contrast to, even as a protest against, the terrible circumstances that surrounded Rinkart and the people he served:

*Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in whom the world rejoices,
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

As those who today seek to be God's thankful people, living in the Realm of God, let us sing together this remarkable hymn....