



“A Declaration of Dependence”

Deuteronomy 8:12-19; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 17:11-19

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Reign of Christ Sunday

I learned about thanksgiving at the dinner table when I was a child. Like families of faith through the centuries, we practiced the ritual of the blessing before we ate. The practice is as old as the Bible epitomized in Jesus who always blessed the food before the meal.

When my brothers and I were old enough, Dad called on us regularly to say the blessing. I don't remember much about my early childhood, but my mother remembers that I would thank God for everything on the table. I'd peek through my fingers to see if I missed anything. In a childish way, I was grateful.

In adolescence I developed a willful incapacity to be grateful for anything. I began to resent all for which I once gave thanks. I thought my family couldn't possibly understand me, that teachers were against me, that my coaches were blind and my church was repressively out of touch.

My sophomore homeroom teacher encouraged us to talk – and we did. Mostly we complained about the bad deal we were getting in life and the school. An abiding theme was that no one understood us. Once, she looked straight at me (or at least it seemed like it) and said, “I do understand you. That's why I don't trust you!” She was right.

My dogged commitment to that ungrateful rebellion was morally blinding. I was incapable of seeing love, experiencing joy, or recognizing the beauty inside me and all around me.

In retrospect, I also learned that ingratitude is not fulfilling, nor does it offer any joy to those who nurture it. It is, in fact, rather destructive.

But, thanks be to God, I grew up and rediscovered gratitude. I began to understand I am blessed in more ways that I will ever fully comprehend. Along the way I've learned that thankfulness bears an inherent power to create great good.

When I'd been a minister barely five months, Thanksgiving Day came along. My congregation had an old Thanksgiving tradition. The night before Thanksgiving Day, we'd gather for a service of thanksgiving. Most of the service was devoted to people standing to tell what they were thankful for that year.

I stood in the front directing the meeting and listening to stories of faith, family and life. The longer I listened the more I felt compelled to add my voice. Only a year earlier, I was planning to go to England for graduate school and become a professor. Then, for a variety of reasons, I found myself in a country church as far from the academic world as I could imagine. And yet, these simple, good people had opened their lives and homes to me and my family and loved us generously. For no good reason, they'd taken a huge risk

and hired a minister without one day's experience – they trusted me with their lives and eternal souls. It was breathtaking trust.

And the experience changed me profoundly. At last I found my voice and told the congregation how grateful I was that I was in their town involved in their lives and not in England studying. Saying “thank you” out loud released something in me that was wonderfully liberating. I discovered that my gratitude touched them in deep ways too. I learned something about life, faith and ministry that night.

Among our dear friends in that congregation was an older couple from Denmark. Both Walther and Johanna were seared by the experience of wartime privation. During the German occupation of Denmark, they were teenagers responsible for feeding their families and often they would spend the day looking for food and coming home empty-handed. They knew the pangs of hunger. They emigrated to Canada after the war and experienced another kind of poverty. Johanna used to make clothes for their son from rags she collected in the neighborhood.

We spent many hours in their home visiting and eating. No visit went without the hospitality of coffee and sweets. Every time we broke bread Walther asked if he could bless the food. And every time he thanked God for having food to eat and he never failed to ask God to bless those who didn't have enough to eat. Often his voice would break with emotion as he prayed.

There's something about being thankful that is necessary for a good life. Gratitude brings out the best in us.

For millennia wise women and men have believed thanksgiving is not only a necessary virtue, but perhaps the most basic virtue. The Roman writer Cicero said, “A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues.” The ancient Jewish rabbis taught, “It is forbidden man to enjoy anything of the world without benediction.” More recently the great English man of letters, G.K. Chesterton wrote, “I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.”

Chesterton also wrote,

You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.

This week *The New York Times* reviewed a new book by the famous food writer Margaret Visser. This book, however, is about gratitude. It's titled, *The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude*. According to the review, Ms. Visser believes that gratitude is necessary for life. It is, she writes, a form of politeness that is “the grease that keeps society running.”

Gratitude, according to Visser, is built into our social relationships. It is prevalent in our language. Some Americans say thank you up to one hundred times a day. Gratitude runs deep in the human soul. She reports that many Alzheimer patients continue to say “thank you” long after they lose contact with reality.

Gratitude is a very large issue, a worldview that allows us not to take people, life, or the world for granted. Thankfulness allows us to climb out of selves and greet the world. It requires humility and, at the same time, it enables us to see and appreciate the world around us. Visser also notes the reverse: that a lack of thankfulness builds hostility in us that distorts our vision of others and the world.

As a food writer and observer of the world, Visser concludes that gratitude is first and best learned in families at the dinner table.

I suspect you've noticed that saying "thank you" is not natural. Children are not born grateful. Their first words tend to be "mine!" not thank you. In fact, it seems funny to imagine a child ending a meal by saying "Mom or dad, thanks for all the work you put into making this fine meal. And, by the way, thanks for working so hard to provide me with clothes and a warm house."

Gratitude – or our lack of it – is part of human nature that needs fixing. Scripture teaches that ingratitude corrupts us. Think about it. Ingratitude destroys relationships, divides families, and disfigures culture. It creates arrogance, feeds the ego in unhealthy ways, and manufactures hubris. A culture, or a person marked by ingratitude, tends to become either a culture of grievance or a culture of entitlement. Neither is good for the soul or the world.

I suppose that's why the bible is filled with exhortations to be grateful. The Old Testament Lesson is part of Moses' last words to the people of God. "When you enter the land God promised you – a good land filled with potential and opportunity – don't forget the God who gave it to you. And by the way, remember also that everything is gift, including the capacity to create wealth. Remember that and be grateful, very grateful.

The rest of the Hebrew bible is the story of regular forgetfulness and occasional remembrance. And the story is written to help us remember.

St. Paul, the first Christian theologian, offers another reflection on gratitude. Looking out on the human race and looking back on the history of the people of God, Paul suggests that lack of gratitude is the origin of much of what is wrong in the world. Ingratitude ignores God, fails to appreciate God's beautiful creation, and renders us incapable of loving our neighbors.

Christian salvation restores the desire for and capacity to be grateful. The Epistle Lesson simply reports that thanksgiving is a natural consequence of the new creation God is establishing on earth. That thanksgiving lives in the hearts of the people of faith and flows from our lips when we gather to worship. Being a Christian is saying, "Thank you, God. Thank you, world. Thank you sisters and brothers."

At its heart, faith is dependence. Faith realizes God is the Lord and we are not. Faith declares we are not on our own. Faith entrusts God with our lives and our destinies.

Faith creates gratitude: gratitude to God for taking us on and walking with us through life; gratitude for the beautiful, fruitful, wonderful world in which we live; gratitude for the web of interdependent relationships in which we live and on which we rely.

Gratitude is a way of seeing things, a vision of the world that offers clarity. There is plenty in life and in this world to resent and about which to be angry. We can spend our lives wishing we were somebody else, had come from a different family, had better luck in love and work, or lived in a different time and place.

There is also plenty in that same life that is good, beautiful and lovely. We are loved. We are surrounded by friends in this community, most of us have more than enough to live. Gratitude is the tipping point that turns resentment and anger into thanksgiving and delight. Gratitude offers us an alternative vision of life and it's our choice.

The best part of gratitude is that it seems to bear a generative power. It works and its work is good. While gratitude is a response to what is good about God and life, at the same time gratitude liberates the heart to enjoy God, God's world and the people around us. Gratitude expands our hearts; ingratitude shrivels our souls and robs us of joy.

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The old Westminster Confession of Faith's first question asks: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "The chief end of man is to glorify God." Most people end there but the answer continues, "and enjoy God forever." The end of gratitude is joy.

Melanie Beatty puts it this way,

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.

We're forgetful and we need reminding. That's why we're here. Thanksgiving Day is another appropriate reminder to foster and nurture the powerful and necessary virtue of gratitude. Behind all the bounty of our lives stands a beneficent God. Thank you, God.

Amen

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