

What are you thankful for? It's a timely question. It's November 3<sup>rd</sup> now, time to start thinking about your answer to this question in case you're asked to share some of your thoughts around a Thanksgiving table at the end of the month. Nothing worse than being caught out at a round robin "tell us what you're thankful for" toast when all you can think of is either the standard answer ("for friends and family") or the silly answer ("for my new flannel pajamas") or the snarky answer ("for the fact that it looks like you didn't overcook the turkey for once"). Better to start pondering this question now, to think of a good answer ahead of time.

But what do you do if the answer doesn't come naturally? What do you do if your thankfulness doesn't bubble to the surface all on its own like the waters of a spring? What do you do if you can't think of an answer to that question at all, or, if you do, it's an answer that gets stuck somewhere between your head and your heart and doesn't really feel true, doesn't really feel like anything? What do you

do if someone asks you what you're thankful for and your heart lies dormant, hidden in the dark behind curtains of sorrow or anxiety or apathy or neglect? What do you do if there seems to be no thanksgiving in you at all?

Well, first off, I think you give yourself a break. It isn't so unusual to find ourselves short on gratitude. I know that in my own life there are certainly times when the worries and the woes seem to outweigh the grace and the gifts. It's part of being human, I think, to focus on what we don't have yet – the money, the peace of mind, the security, the health, the love – as opposed to reflecting on all that we do have. And in those bleak times of our lives when our burdens are tremendously heavy and our hearts utterly broken, it can seem like our capacity for thanksgiving is lost forever. What are you thankful for? Sometimes it's nearly impossible to answer that question.

This is precisely why wise spiritual leaders talk about thankfulness as a practice – because they know that it's unlikely we're

going to wake up every single morning full of wonder and hope for the day before us, just as it's unlikely we're going to go to bed every evening full of holy appreciation for the day behind. They know that sometimes, the bubbling spring of our thanksgiving gets overgrown and weedy, and that if we're going to find it again, we need to grab a shovel and start digging. They know that sometimes thanksgiving is more about working for it than about feeling it, that sometimes our thanksgiving is just lost, and we have to go and find it.

There are lots and lots of ways to do this. There are lots and lots of books about how to tap into the wellspring of your gratitude, lots and lots of wisdom out there to help us answer the question, "What are you thankful for?" Many of you, I'm sure, have some kind of gratitude practice. Some of you might keep gratitude journals or take the time to tell your partner or spouse three things you're grateful for every day. I'll bet a lot of our families take the time to say "Help me God" and "Thank you God" prayers each evening. You can do a

gratitude walk, make a gratitude collage, write a gratitude blog. You can write thank you notes, send thank you texts, set thank you reminders in your phone. You can also, of course, get a gratitude app. There are a million helpful tips online to help you find your thanksgiving, and a million articles to tell you why doing so is good for your physical, emotional, and psychological health.

All of this is beneficial. All of this is a blessing to the world. It is meet and right to have people all over the world focusing on gratitude, practicing awareness and self-reflection, moving their bodies and lowering their blood pressure, raising their emotional resilience and connecting powerfully to their families and communities. All of this is very good...but you and I are invited into something even better. Because you and I are invited into the practice of thanksgiving given to us by Jesus Christ, a practice far more profound and far more wondrous than simply thinking about three things that made you happy today.

This is what Jesus' practice of thanksgiving looks like: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, for your reward is great in heaven. These are Luke's Beatitudes, a litany most of us has heard a hundred times. But listen carefully to what Jesus is saying and not saying here. Jesus is not saying blessed will you be, sometime in the future when your life is a whole lot better than it is now. Jesus is saying blessed are you now – now, not in spite of the challenges of your life, but because of them. Blessed are you now, because your poverty, your hunger, your sorrow, your being despised and rejected are all being redeemed and healed by the God who loves you. Blessed are you now, because God is already working in the world to bring about justice and mercy, to fill the hungry with good things, to lift up the lowly and to bring down the mighty from their seat. Blessed are you now, because Christ has come into the

world with the particular mission to bless you when you are most in need. Blessed are you now, because Jesus is interested in all of your life, not just the two or three happiest moments you might record in a journal. Blessed are you, now, all of you. So give thanks.

This is advanced-level thanksgiving. This is a grown-up, mature thanksgiving practice. This is the thanksgiving of the saints, of those blessed women and men we remember this day. For we know that while these saints led holy lives, they did not lead charmed ones. The saints that we remember today most assuredly had days when feelings of thanksgiving did not leap up from their hearts when they opened their eyes in the morning. Their lives were hard; they were the people who were hungry, weeping, poor, and hated. The saints in heaven were people whose lives were full of difficulty and darkness. And yet they chose to live lives of thanksgiving. They were able to be thankful because they knew Jesus' practice of thanksgiving, and because they believed that what Jesus said was true. They believed that

when they were poor, hungry, mourning, and hated, that they were also blessed. They believed that when their lives were full of woe, they were held up and prayed for by those around them. They believed in forgiveness, in transformation and redemption; they believed in the coming Kingdom of Heaven and their place in it. They believed in Jesus, and they were thankful.

This is the kind of thanksgiving you and I are called to this day. To be thankful not just for the blessings in our lives but for how even the woes can turn us back to prayer, back to repentance and making amends, back to recognizing our utter dependence on God. This kind of thanksgiving keeps us softhearted and compassionate towards each other, even those we might call enemies. This kind of thanksgiving keeps us reaching out to those who are poor, hungry, weeping, or hated. This kind of thanksgiving helps us to transform the strength and solace we receive at this thanksgiving table into word and action. This kind of thanksgiving leads us to give, deeply, of our

time and gifts, and of our money and resources, in joyful celebration of the blessing of our whole lives. And this kind of thanksgiving helps to remind us of our deep connection to the communion of all the saints - to those who have gone before us and to those who walk beside us. Which is good, because we need the saints around us if we are to practice this kind of thanksgiving. We will need each other along this journey of thanks giving. We will need to pray for one another, to do good to one another, to bless and love one another, to remind each other of the truth that there is nothing in this world that cannot reveal something of the great love of God.

So what are you thankful for? Think of the joys in your life, and then think of the challenges. Think of the love in your life, and then think of the need. Think of the peace in your life, and then think of the pain. For I tell you that there is nothing, nothing in this life that can separate us from the love and the blessings of God. So - what are you thankful for? In Christ, there is no wrong answer.

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*All Saints Sunday*

*Church of the Atonement, Chicago*