

Thanks to a book Chuck Lochner loaned me recently, I've been reading about gratitude. So it's only fitting that I should begin with a word of thanks. This time of year, it is hard not to dwell on gratitude, which is a topic that just keeps unfolding and unfolding, like one of those paper engineered cards. I'm not going to attempt to cover all the facets of gratitude in one sermon, you will be glad to hear, but it is something that we are more acutely aware of as the end of November approaches.

We have paired Thanksgiving with a feast for as long as I've known about Thanksgiving but throughout history, thanksgiving was just as often paired with fasting. The change from fasting to feasting is interesting. The Pilgrims of Massachusetts most often called for a day of 'fasting and humiliation' for certain events. They were speaking to a particular God, one that liked people hungry and humble. Enjoyment of this world was not on the agenda. This world was sinful and corrupt. Gratitude was shown by penitence and abstinence. Or else.

That's not how we choose to show gratitude. Universalism freed people from the very real terror people had of damnation. In the process, a kinder deity showed love for humans and a desire that they enjoy the world and its riches. Those daring Universalists said that this is a beautiful world and one to be savored. As a corollary, we also said that our mission was to ensure that more and more

people were able to enjoy this beautiful world. That is why social justice has been such dominant part of most U-U congregations.

Our gratitude is rooted in this sense of the wonder and beneficence of this world, not of a possible world to come. It is addressed, for some of us, to something beyond ourselves, to some force, some power for good, some sense that, in the vastness of the universe, we have come to exist when it might have been otherwise. Might by a whisker of difference, have been otherwise.

But for some of us, there is no one living at that address. There is no force, no power, no mystery beyond the world that we see around us. Within this world, we are the people who have made our lives. It is human spirit and human effort that have changed this world and provided us with what we have. If this is so, to whom do we send those thank you cards? Is it to ourselves, to our own inner being, our own minds and hearts? If this is the case, what note should we send? If this is the case, should any card of gratitude be sent at all? For many, not just U-U's, perhaps especially not U-U's, this is the case.

We live in a very rich country. For most of us, Thanksgiving is one more feast in a continuing series of feasts. It is a feast at which we give at least a token moment of thanks to someone or something somewhere for our good fortune, for our families, for our friends. There is a fleeting moment in which we are, possibly,

aware that it might very well have been otherwise. Perhaps for those whose lives have been beset by blows and reversals, the thanks may be particularly heartfelt. They may see, more than those of us whose lives have been relatively untroubled, how close we are to the edge, every day, whether we see the precipice or not. But, for many, this feeling soon passes. For most of us, we expect a certain way of life and a certain continuity to our days. We do not see good fortune as exceptional; we see it as the norm. We address our rather perfunctory thanks to no one in particular, perhaps to a vague idea that we should be a little more conscious that we have good fortune, that things are not otherwise.

There is a paradox in this. It seems as if the people whose lives have been interrupted by misfortune find themselves at a crossroads, a crossroads that is only revealed in times of pain and heartache. The signs at this crossroads point in two directions: one points toward the city of Gratitude while the other points to the metropolis of Despair. The old way forward is closed.

When I worked in prison, I would often hear some of the African-American prisoners say a sign and countersign every day to each other. One would say, "God is good." And the other would reply, "All the time." This stood in sharp contrast to the usual conversation in prison in which there was not much that was recognized as good at all. Complaining and a certain sort of humor got most of my staff and

library patrons through the day. And yet, there was this exchange, and always a genuine smile at the exchange. For most of the men I knew, life had never been good. They had been marked for their fate from birth-- Poverty, Racism, Violence were always the bad fairies present at their christenings and yet, God is good, they said, All the time, they responded. When I asked, some said it was just because it was so. If God was God, they He (always) He, must always be good. It was all part of a plan that we couldn't see. The person to whom they addressed their gratitude had a very fixed address, a known abode.

I was so curious about this seeming contradiction that I tried saying this to myself. Good days and bad days, particularly bad days. Days my reason was violated by the idea of any kind of supernatural agency let alone a traditional God as well as the days when something like that made perfect sense, I said those words. I know it's not for everyone, but I have to tell you, it helped. If people living in the most desolate ashes could find something good in the world, why not I who live in the snug home of privilege?

Gratitude. Gratitude to something or someone. A sense of a world beyond the narrow confines of our problems and our deficits. This desire to see something right within us, with the universe of which we are a small part, this is what motivates the books and articles and songs that currently tell us of the necessity of

gratitude. Not that it's a nice idea. Not that it's good manners or the mark of a better kind of person, but necessity. Because we are beginning to see, like children who have had too much candy, that there is no happiness where we thought to find it. We cannot spend our way to delight.

And so, we come in gratitude, not in humility before a harsh deity, but because gratitude is a healthy way to see our place in the universe. We did not make ourselves. We did not choose the circumstances of our lives. An awful lot of people worked hard for us to be where we are.

In this view, gratitude becomes perspective, a perspective that can save us from the view that we are alone responsible for all our successes and need have gratitude to no one. That view is fine as long as we are doing well but it is poison when things are going badly. At best, it is simply a dangerously naïve view of life. We have the freedom to create our own lives, a freedom we can choose or discard, but we do not choose the circumstances under which we exercise that freedom. I was born with many benefits and limitations already embedded in me, the time in history, my parents, my class, my race, my gender, my nationality, my ethnic heritage, my degree of intelligence or attractiveness or height or predisposition to certain conditions. So were we all. None of us chooses these things. By a very

small change in any of these circumstances, it might have been otherwise. Very much otherwise.

But none of us chooses suffering, either and yet it happens, oh, it happens. Generally sooner rather than later. So what about that? Are we really supposed to be grateful for the bad things that come into our lives?

I really dislike being told to be grateful. I especially dislike having people point out the silver lining in my clouds. If I want to wallow in self-pity, darn it all, I should have that inalienable right. On the other hand, here I am talking about the necessity of gratitude. Hypocrisy? Possibly. But I do know that, while an occasional wallow won't hurt me much, a lifetime of doing so, a lifetime of nurturing my sense of injury, a lifetime of a narrow focus on the wrongs and hurts in my life may well do me a lot of harm. Suffering comes in many forms but it comes to everyone and many of the well-meaning platitudes that people use in an attempt to cheer us up, only further our sense of isolation and misunderstanding. How can we both respect other's feelings and yet find a reason to be grateful for suffering? Perhaps it is in seeing what suffering can do. I'd like to read you this by Jack Kornfield:

“It is a basic principle of spiritual life that we learn the deepest things in unknown territory. Often it is when we feel most confused inwardly and are in the midst of our greatest difficulties that something new will open.

We awaken most easily to the mystery of life through our weakest side. The areas of our greatest strength, where we are the most competent and clearest, tend to keep us away from mystery.”

We learn through suffering and we are called to turn that learning into understanding. Understanding turns to compassion. We are able to connect to others, especially others whose sufferings we understand, better than we can if we had never known sorrow. Suffering links us to other sufferers. And we are all, at one time or another, sufferers. This is when the discipline of gratitude is most necessary.

When we can't see those invisible links, then we, do, indeed, stand in danger of going down the black hole of despair, the hole that we can come to guard against any intrusion by others. But when we can see the connection to others, then we may have richer, closer relationships. We connect in the broken places, not where we are smooth and whole. And so, in a way, we can become grateful for the worlds that those things we did not want can open to us.

Those of us born into a world of individualism, which would mean anyone born in the west for the past 500 years or so, have a difficult time with connection, with seeing ourselves as a part of a complex whole rather than as isolated and self-actualizing units of one. If gratitude opens us to the reality that we are dependent on others, if gratitude opens us to our need for each other, than I would be grateful for that wisdom.

So who we address our gratitude to is important. Do we see ourselves as puppets dependent on a master puppeteer, made to be grateful for our existence and conscious of our failings? I think of this as the old religion, the religion of shame and terror. If in the process of casting off that religion, we went too far in seeing ourselves as autonomous and self-made, going back, as fundamentalists try to do, is no solution. The genie of individualism is well and truly out of the bottle. The only way is forward, learning from that which may no longer work; working toward that which will.

Who do we address when we write out thank you notes? As individuals bound together on this journey, we may write those notes in many different ways. They may be sent to many different addresses. But I would hope that they would all accomplish one goal. To let us see ourselves in some true relation to the world which offers so much. To let us see that the whole of life, its joy and its sorrow, is



something for which we have cause to be grateful. The discipline of gratitude, and it is a hard discipline, can let us see that we are always connected and never alone. As the hymn I didn't choose says, 'for all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise; for all life is a gift; which we are called to use; to build the common good; and make our own days glad.'