

Proper 29B; Thanksgiving
The Rev. Devon Anderson
November 25, 2018

Minnesota Thanksgiving

*For that free Grace bringing us past great risks
& thro' great griefs surviving to this feast
sober & still, with the children unborn and born,
among brave friends, Lord, we stand again in debt
and find ourselves in the glad position: Gratitude.*

*We praise our ancestors who delivered us here
within warm walls all safe, aware of music,
likely toward ample & attractive meat
with whatever accompaniment
Kate in her kind ingenuity has seen fit to devise,*

*and we hope - across the most strange year to come -
continually to do them and You not sufficient honour
but such as we become able to devise
out of decent or joyful conscience & thanksgiving.
Yippee!*

Bless then, as Thou wilt, this wilderness board.

We are at the tail end of our Thanksgiving holiday – and tomorrow morning many of us will return to school or work. It is my hope that we return with a little rest under our belts, that this past weekend has offered us something to feed our mind, body and spirit in order to go back out into the world and do the work God has given us to do. But we still have today to linger just a bit longer on the reason for the season. And that reason of course, is: Gratitude. The poet John Berryman, who spent his 30-year writing career teaching at the University of Minnesota, wrote *Minnesota Thanksgiving* as a table grace for his family and guests. The poem amply serves this modest function – and any poet who can successfully deploy the word “Yippee” is, in my humble opinion, an artist in the truest sense. This morning I want to offer a few of my own reflections about gratitude and its place particularly in the lives of people of faith.

I've been thinking about what it means to *go a bit deeper with the practice of giving thanks*. We are all aware of, and most of us practice giving thanks for, good things immediately at hand. This year, for example, I am thankful that my daughter came home from college, that we were, after 3 months, together again as a family, under one roof – all my chicks safely tucked into the roost. I feel blessed by the presence of family, and lots of friends, and for the food that we ate with them, constantly, non-stop, meal after meal, for four days. In quiet moments over the weekend, I felt thankful for the chance to sneak upstairs to my home office, close the door behind me and dive back into my current project of

sniffing out lovely and meaningful prayers for Trinity's Advent worship services. Sitting in my cozy office pouring through liturgy books is my absolute "happy place" and, again, I felt so thankful for the chance to have a job I love and projects that engage my intellect and passion.

It was in pursuit of Advent resources that I stumbled, instead, upon a prayer about giving thanks – but thanks not for happiness and warmth and friends and food, but, strangely, thanksgiving for hardship, and sadness and fear. "*O persistent God,*" the prayer read, "*deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle. Pressure me that I may grow more human, not through the lessening of my struggles, but through an expansion of them that will un-damn me and unbury my gifts. Deepen my hurt until I learn to share it and myself openly, and my needs honestly. Sharpen my fears until I name them and release the power I have locked in them and they in me. Accentuate my confusion until I shed those grandiose expectations that divert me from the small, glad gifts of the now and the here and the me. Expose my shame where it shivers, crouched behind the curtains of propriety, until I can laugh at last through my common frailties and failures, laugh my way toward becoming whole.*"

What would it look like to be thankful for feelings like hurt and fear and confusion and shame? What would it look like to express gratitude for those emotions – and the experiences that evoke them – because of what they teach us about ourselves, and how they can affect our relationship with family and community and with God?

Here's an example: the week before last my son was checked illegally from behind in a hockey scrimmage, breaking his collarbone in two. Emergency surgery inserted a plate to reconnect the pieces of his long bone back together. It was just really hard. My son was in tremendous pain and I felt helpless. Beyond securing the best medical care possible, and making him good food, managing his meds, and assuring him that he'd heal -- there was very little I could do for him. It was hurtful to see him hurt. I was afraid, too, that the injury would prevent him from the athletics that give him so much life. I felt angry, too, that the coaches hadn't prevented the incident – it was an unusually physical game and before the hit there had been more than a few scuffles on the ice between players. Why hadn't anyone noticed or intercepted or called for a time out? We were confused about the medical options, before surgery emerged as the only real choice. And, if I'm completely honest, I felt a tinge of shame – ashamed to have put my child in danger, shame as I nodded my head and agreed with a friend as she said, "well it's a miracle he's lasted this long in hockey without a serious injury. It's only ever a matter a time." Shame when I had to miss a staff meeting, and later that day a Vestry meeting – because honestly, taking care of my son was all I could do, no more and no less. I simply didn't have anything else to give – not superwoman after all, I guess. All those emotions swirled around in my head: helplessness, hurt, anger, confusion, shame.

Even with my own line of thinking here, I cannot bring myself to be thankful for my son's accident. I'm not. But in retrospect I am thankful for the experience and the negative emotions it evoked because they made me more aware of blessings, of goodness, and put me in different and stronger relationship with people. The accident reconnected us with an old friend, for example, a surgeon with a hockey-playing son of his own, who took care of my son and walked him through everything and put him at ease, a surgeon who came home early from his Thanksgiving for a follow-up appointment. My overwhelming sense of helplessness and fear was met by a kind and caring man who ministered to us and brushed off, with embarrassment, our prolific expressions of thanks and gratitude. I am thankful that in the midst of hurt and confusion and shame many of you reached out to my family – we were even

offered some of that famous squash soup from the Trinity Care Team Ministry. You prayed for us, sent us cards, said kind words of support and encouragement. In the midst of a horrible experience I found myself on the receiving end of your care, grateful for all the conditions that allowed for that gift of connection and compassion.

The practice of taking our gratitude a level deeper – of claiming the “bad things” as experiences worthy of gratitude – can also change and deepen our relationship with the Divine. The late Peter Gomes, long-time minister at Memorial Church in Harvard Yard put it this way: Thanksgiving is a time when we remember to remember. “I invite you,” he once wrote, “to remember not the usual good things, not the list of the blessings you have received, like an audit at a stockholders’ meeting, but the bad things, by name, that have happened to you, the terrible things, the worst things. Think of your worst moments, your sorrows, your losses, your sadness, and then remember that here you are, able to remember them. You got through the worst day of your life; there may be yet a worse one in store for you, but that’s for next Thanksgiving. This Thanksgiving you got through the trauma, you got through the trial, you endured the temptation, you survived the bad relationship, you’re making your way out of the dark. Remember who got you through. You got into the mess on your own but remember that it was God who got you out of it, got you through it, and walked with you in the middle of it. There are more troubles to come, infinitely more troubles to come, and you may be in trouble right now, but if you remember to remember you will remember, as the old spiritual says, ‘How I got over.’ How I was spared, how the Lord did a wonderful thing in bringing me through to this present moment; and how he did it I will never know...but I will remember to remember to thank God. Remember to remember, and not just the good things – you’ll take those for granted – but remember the bad things, and then look to see where you are.”

In the end, I think that Thanksgiving is, or can be, about telling the truth – by claiming the good, the bad, and the ugly – the whole lot of it – as worthy of thanks because it’s in the hardship, the trauma, the insecurity that we learn important things about ourselves and we can best open an acute awareness inside of us that we wouldn’t otherwise have. We know that that is where God meets us - in those receptive, vulnerable, and open spaces.

And so, as we wrap up another Thanksgiving weekend and hurl ourselves head first into yet another holiday season let us rejoice in the bad things as those experiences that remind us that we’re alive, that we feel, that we have been given life and freedom and resources, that we are surrounded by people who will, if we let them, be God’s ambassadors of grace and healing to us.

The thirteenth century mystic and poet Meister Eckhart once wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your entire life is ‘Thank you,’ that would suffice.” And that is the heart of all this talk about gratitude and giving thanks. The lesson is to do it, without ceasing, in ways big and small, silent and verbose, and in the end – Yipee! - we draw ever closer to the rich, deep life we so crave. AMEN.