

THE COMPLICATIONS OF GRATITUDE

*A sermon by Rabbi Jill Perlman and The Rev. Chris Wendell
Bedford Community Thanksgiving Service
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THE RECTOR – What a joy it is to be here today with all of you – to come together, to be nourished and challenged by the different wisdom our various traditions can offer, to find unity in song and word and silence, and most of all to stir up a sense of gratitude in our hearts for each other, for the community we share, and for the whole creation that nurtures and sustains our common life.

THE RABBI – Indeed, this is the time of year when gratitude abounds! Families gather, work is put aside for a short time at least, meals are prepared and savored. In the midst of a world that so often trades on feelings of scarcity, we take time to acknowledge the abundance of blessings in our lives, often gathered with those we love most.

THE RECTOR – I find myself always reminded at this time of year of the power that gratitude can have as a force for good. Gratitude is not a passive emotion. It's active! Gratitude creates the conditions of interior life that are necessary for deep listening, for self-giving, or for personal transformation to occur. It is perhaps the foundational value on which an ever-widening beloved community can come into being. This is why gratitude can often be found at the very core of many of the world's faith traditions, because it softens our hearts and opens us to the mysteries of the Divine and to genuine encounters with each other.

THE RABBI – And yet, the feelings of gratitude, the sense of abundance and appreciation we often manage to discover at this time of year, can often feel ephemeral. Just when we apprehend a sense of true thankfulness, it seems to vanish – to slip through our fingers. Gratitude, it turns out, is a complicated blessing – so desired and yet so hard to hold onto.

THE RECTOR – Gratitude is complicated when we live in a world where week after week there are images of violence and hatred on our televisions and in our newspapers. Gratitude is complicated when the scourge of religious intolerance

recurs in our own and neighboring towns. Gratitude is complicated when racial alienation on our countries' campuses and in communities of all shapes and sizes is given voice, and can no longer be patched up by good intentions. Gratitude is complicated when we face the uncertainty of prolonged unemployment, when cancer strikes, when there is a newly empty seat at our Thanksgiving table. Gratitude is complicated when even the origins of our Thanksgiving Holiday contain a deep ambivalence about the possibility for peaceful co-existence between those of different backgrounds and world views.

THE RABBI – When I encounter pain, when I feel burdened, when I hear difficult news story after news story after news story, gratitude indeed feels complicated. In the midst of weeks like this one, I want to call out, “God – intervene. God – send a miracle!” And then I remember that all I need to do is lift my eyes and here, here I see a miracle. Here, I see people of all different faith traditions and backgrounds and beliefs coming together in a common cause. We are the miracle. For we do not use difference as a means to shut one another down. Instead, we celebrate that difference just as we celebrate our common humanity and our shared values of compassion, care, and love. I believe that God’s hands are my hands and your hands. It is up to us to model each and every day what true partnership, indeed true interfaith partnership, looks like. THAT to me is a miracle.

THE RECTOR – For me, the spiritual question is: how I can recommit each day to gratitude when it is difficult to be grateful, recommit each day to peace in a world of violence? And for us as a community and world, I think the question is: how can we find the gratitude for each other and for the earth that is necessary to make the changes we need to make in our common life? How can we be urgent without being panicked? Strongly convicted without being judgmental? Hopeful without being naive?

One of the resources I turn to with these questions from my tradition is this prayer composed by a Catholic bishop, actually. Like the wisdom that The Rabbi shared, it reminds us that the work of our hands is the work of God’s hands. And it reminds us to, that it will take God working through many hands, through many years, before we reach the peaceable Kingdom, before we fully become the beloved community.

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master
builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.
(From "A Step Along the Way" by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, MI)*

THE RABBI – The Talmud contains the teaching “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it (PirkeiAvot2:21).”

Our days on this earth are short, the work is vast and great and we, the workers get tired at times, but let us remember what it is that we are working for. A better world. A repaired one. Indeed, let us not turn away from the work of building relationships across all lines of difference and for recognizing the sacred amidst the chaos. Let us be thankful for this great world that we have even as, day by day, we endeavor to repair it.

We pray for a miracle. Let us remember that we are and can be that miracle.

May your holiday observance this year be meaningful and reflective!