

Our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

24th Sunday after Pentecost. November 19, 2006. The Sunday before Thanksgiving Day.

Two good ol' boys climbed a fence and began hiking across a pasture one day when – suddenly – they realized that there was a bull in that pasture, and he didn't like trespassers. They started running for the next fence, but the bull was closing on them fast. It seemed obvious they wouldn't make it. One of the two terrified guys hollered to his companion – who was a regular churchgoer – and he said, “Start prayin' Bob! He's gonna get us.”

Bob answered, “I can't pray. I'm not used to saying my prayers out loud.” (He was obviously an Episcopalian.)

“You've got to,” his friend panted, “This bull is gainin' on us!”

“O.K., fine,” Bob panted, “I can remember one: *'For what we're about to receive, O Lord, make us truly thankful!'*”

That's supposed to be funny. But even a silly joke has a grain of truth: thankfulness is an attitude to *all* of life. It's a commitment to discovering how to get in touch with the wellsprings of authentic gratitude – even in the midst of unpleasantness, even in circumstances of grief and loss. In our Eucharistic prayers for both Rite One and Rite Two, we ask that God will accept our *“sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.”* We don't ordinarily think of thanksgiving or praise as a “sacrifice,” do we? A *sacrifice* is “a costly gift, joyfully given.” Are there times when giving thanks to God feels *costly* and the *joy* of it isn't really there? I think the answer to that question is “yes” – particularly when we're facing painful, uncertain, or frightening circumstances. Those are times when the punch-line of the silly joke I told carries a new kind of meaning: “For what we're about to receive, O Lord, make us truly thankful.”

The truth of Christian experience is that we daily receive from God all we need in order to have a spiritually full life, even when we're nearing that life's end. Sometimes God gives us experiences that teach us the virtue of patience, or that will help us learn how to bear pain or adversity, or that will test our faith, so that it can grow strong. Not every gift of God for which we should give thanks is something which – in the moment of our first experiencing it – strikes us as something naturally pleasant or desirable. Usually it's in retrospect, in moments of spiritual reflection, that we look back and recognize certain disagreeable incidents in our lives as mysterious gifts... as, in fact, blessings. We have a common expression to describe those incidents. We call them “blessings in disguise.”

If we haven't cultivated the capacity to perceive the variety of blessings that God gives us – in both the joys and the woes of human life – we miss a lot. We get bitter. And we feel cheated. As the Holy Spirit works in our lives and we mature in faith, we hope to arrive at the point where we're able to look for and find a blessing hidden in experiences that we might otherwise regard as only disasters. There might be disappointment or frustration or grief, but God can show us the gift, the blessing, that's there along with it.

Martin Luther said that *“to thank God with all your heart is an art that the Holy Spirit teaches.”* (I occasionally need the Spirit to give me a personal tutorial.)

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul says, *“In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* I've noticed that when we offer an opportunity for the congregation to offer their own prayers aloud during the intercessions at the Eucharist, there are always *requests*, always *supplications* (to use Paul's word), but few *thanksgivings* —sometimes none— even though the Bible tells us to let our requests be made known to God “by prayers and supplications *with* thanksgiving.” Does this mean we're more focused on what we need (or want) than on what God in his providence has already *given* us? Probably.

Here's a way to start developing the habit of thankfulness. (I've done this myself from time to time, and it really works.) Decide to make *thanksgiving* your only kind of prayer for a set period of time, like a week. Since we're about to celebrate Thanksgiving, that might be a good day to start this discipline, if you want to give it a try.

Starting this Thursday and for a week thereafter, don't *ask* God for anything. And unless you've committed a mortal sin and need to ask forgiveness, don't make any requests. Just say, "Thank you, God," and be *specific* about what you're grateful for.

Following this rule sharpens our powers of observation and hones our spiritual sensitivity. It makes us *take notice* of the diversity of gifts that God provides, but which we overlook because we're accustomed to taking them for granted. (It's amazing how many things we take for granted, how much we consider ourselves *entitled* to. For example, in the material realm, we Americans are accustomed to first class domestic amenities: spacious housing, central heating, pure drinking water from the kitchen tap, electricity on demand 24/7, and relatively cheap fuel – even at \$3 a gallon – for our cars, trucks, and snowmobiles.)

When we get spiritually sensitized to all the "good gifts around us" – including the secret blessings that can come through frustrations and disappointments – we can begin to give thanks to God with greater fluency. And, by the way, in case you're afraid God might think your prayers this week are pretty monotonous, don't worry. It's perfectly O.K. to repeat ourselves, to thank God every day for the very same things. Remember: like telling your wife or husband "I love you," "*Thank you*" is a sentiment that bears frequent repetition – both in prayer to the Lord, and in conversation with your mate!

Developing the habit of thanksgiving is important, but it won't eliminate life's problems. Consider our Pilgrims fathers and mothers. By the grace of God they survived the awful winter of 1620 and celebrated the first Thanksgiving. But they had to endure *another* hard winter in 1621. —And probably in 1622. Simple survival didn't get easier for those tough New England colonists for a long time. Diseases were rampant. Supplies from home were slow in arriving. But in the midst of their privations, they thanked God, and their thankfulness was a sign of their trust. Cultivating the habit of thanksgiving alters our perspective on life.

The attitude of thankfulness can lead to more than just an improvement in the quality of our prayers. I believe that authentic *thankfulness* leads us to become what I call "agents of grace," Christians for whom generous acts of compassion, service, and giving come naturally.

If we're truly grateful to God for what he has given us, we're going to be on the lookout for opportunities to be *givers* ourselves. We're going to look for ways to benefit those who need what *we* can freely supply. That generosity of spirit, arising from thankfulness, is the attitude of *grace*. It's what Jesus was talking about when he said to "*be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.*"

I believe that we're usually the *most* thankful for unexpected, undeserved gifts – the kind that come without warning and which we know we haven't earned. Twenty-two years ago, a man in my parish – someone I hardly knew other than to say "hello" at the church door – came to see me and told me he wanted to give me a new car! He was a wealthy man, and he said, "Go anywhere you want and pick out anything you want. Price doesn't matter. Just shop around 'til you find exactly what suits you. Then call me, and I'll pay for it. —But don't tell anyone. This is to be our little secret. And I'm giving this to you personally; I don't want a tax deduction." I was overwhelmed. I had done nothing for this man. I hardly knew him. But the truth was that I *had* been trying to figure out how to afford a bigger car because I had four growing children. —This gentleman was an "agent of grace." And I was grateful!

If we're the most grateful for gifts that are unexpected and undeserved, maybe we can stimulate gratitude and thankfulness in one another by demonstrating unexpected, unmerited generosity to each other. And the beneficiaries of our "grace" will – we pray – become agents of grace themselves. If we do that, we'll fulfill Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us, for the most precious gift we've received, a gift we could not have earned and did nothing to merit, is our Lord's gift of himself on the cross for us.

So what do we conclude? Simply this: we're the beneficiaries of God's generosity. And we're called by Christ to *give generously to those who don't expect it and probably don't deserve it*. If we do that, we'll discover that gratitude and grace are multiplied. And we'll prove ourselves to be children of God and disciples of the One who freely gave himself for us.