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“The Gratitude Imperative”
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Last Thursday, many of us joined with friends or family to enjoy the traditional meal that celebrates outrageous commercialization and the official start of the holiday shopping season...

No, I'm sorry...I know that we actually celebrated was *Thanksgiving*, our national holiday of gratitude.

Of course, for most of the world's people, November 23 wasn't a holiday. We know that not everyone sits down for an abundant meal in a cozy home, on this or any other day. And, knowing the historic beginnings of this holiday, in retrospect we may consider that not all of the parties involved now see reasons for being grateful. For the Wampanoeg, who shared their meal with the Pilgrims, and other Native people, this day is sometimes referred to as the “National Day of Mourning” or “Thanksgrieving.”

But, this isn't a sermon about Thanksgiving. It's a sermon about giving thanks.

And most of us here have a lot to be grateful for, so, over our turkey, or nut loaf, on Thanksgiving day, we probably recounted our gratitude, if only briefly, before the game – or our nap – began.

Despite our abundance, we seem to focus more on life's debits than on its credits. Read a newspaper, watch television, listen to people – it's problems and performance gaps, deficits and declines - a litany of how things are messed up and who's to blame. Our thoughts are filled with concerns about what's not right and how to fix it. We examine our lives and fear that in some way or another, that they're not good enough or they aren't living up to our or others' expectations. Our focus narrows and our lives constrict around that fear, and we become negative, critical and judgmental.

Even when, in truth, the majority of life is going pretty well, our natural inclination is to focus in with laser-like clarity on what's not going according to our plan. Then, because our focus is on life's imperfections, we find it hard to express gratitude, or appreciation, or thanks, to ourselves, to others, or to the Divine.

A part of us may yearn to have life be perpetually rewarding, never demanding that we make hard sacrifices or face difficult choices. But, it doesn't always work like that. In real life, no one is spared tough times. Not all of life's blessings come in pretty packages.

Of course it's hard to be grateful when the circumstances we find ourselves in are not ones of our choosing. Perhaps we've become ill or we've lost the ability to do something we once enjoyed. The world is at war. We experience the loss of a loved one. What is there to feel grateful for?

There is so much in life that we will never be able to understand, like why our good plans fall through or the unexpected reaches out to trip us up. Anne Lamott, author of *Traveling Mercies*, writes that “Gratitude, not understanding, is the secret to joy...” Lamott reminds us that being grateful, letting go of our need to make sense of it all, is the path to regaining our sense of life’s bountiful gifts and pleasures.

Ms. Lamott is one of my favorite authors. To me, she shares a lot of common sense in her writing about successful living. In her writing, she talks about her two favorite prayers. They are simple and to the point because, Lamott says, prayers don’t have to be elaborate to have an impact. Sometimes, when our hearts or bodies are hurting and our soul is in despair, a simple prayer may be the best we can come up with. The first of her two simple favorites is “Help me, help me, help me.”

In the Bible, Matthew 7:7 tells us that in our prayers, we are to “ask and it will be given to you...” In response to our prayerful asking, we hope God delivers and that we receive only the good blessings. But, asking in prayer is about opening to the sacred. It’s about presenting yourself before the Holy with an open mind and open heart, not a project plan with deadlines and performance targets.

The message of this passage in Matthew is that our prayers are answered in the cosmic scheme of things. It just may not be what we expected, or when. We are asked to be open to what transpires in our lives and see the opportunity and wisdom in what we encounter. Sometimes the best prayer is “help me, help me, help me.”

Conventional wisdom says that time heals all wounds. I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know we gain new perspectives over time. Finally, the time comes when you see a larger pattern and understand that your prayers were answered, but differently perhaps than you’d hoped. You see positive outcomes from the tough times. In hindsight, you may actually find yourself glad you missed the “road not taken” as poet Robert Frost called it.

For me, I know that life’s tough times have helped me develop new perspectives. I’ve learned about wells of resilience and internal strength that I had no idea existed in me. I’ve gained a deeper understanding of love and compassion. I’ve had to explore options I doubt I would have otherwise considered. You, too, may have experienced these gifts received as a resulting from experiences of great loss, disappointment, or deep despair.

Anne Lamott says her second favorite prayer is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Because, along with the deficits, life is also full of gifts and graces, delights and delicious moments we experience every day. And giving thanks shouldn’t be just for one day, Thanksgiving. Remembering our gratuities can remind us that “big things” aren’t necessarily the best blessings after all.

Perhaps one of your best blessings are those few seconds at dawn, right before the first golden edge of the sun peeks above the mountain tops, as light washes over the landscape and separates night from day. You can’t buy those moments at Costco.

Or, maybe it's the memory of a friend or family member, a beloved encounter when you deeply shared a moment of each other's lives. That's not available at any online shopping site.

Perhaps it's a Bach concerto. Or just five more minutes between the snugly flannel sheets of your cozy bed on a nippy morning. Puppy breath. Chocolate.

Life is so full, there are just too many to name.
Thank you, thank you, thank you.

From the Christian tradition, in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 5, Verses 16-18 we're reminded to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." To pray without ceasing, to never stop praying - I don't think these words are telling us to spend our days on our knees in unrelenting cries of supplication. Rather, I think they call us to be awake and aware and in awe of life around us in every moment, and to give thanks for it, whether it looks good to us in the moment or not.

When we find ourselves caught up in an "addiction to negativity," how do we reconnect with our "attitude of gratitude?" We can watch what we pay attention to by making a conscious choice to develop an appreciative attitude.

We might take a lesson from the practice of the Native American Santee/Dakotas. Author and physician Ohiyesa once said that in the life of his people, there was only one inevitable duty – the duty of prayer. In his tradition, people start each day by bathing and then facing the sun to offer their unspoken praise.

For them, this attitude of reverence and honor is an important key to life, setting a tone of appreciation for that day and for life itself.

Consider the Buddhist practice of mindfulness in all of life's tasks and endeavors. We can breathe in and breathe out and experience nature. Sit in a moment of delicious silence and still your nattering mind. Connect with others. Do something nice for someone, and for yourself, every day. Keep a gratitude diary.

We can find practices that help us reconnect with the ever-present mystery and wonder of life, reaffirming our appreciation for the gifts upon gifts of existence that form the warp of our day and the weft of our experience, creating the weave of our life.

Gratitude is not easy; it is, in fact, a demanding spiritual practice. Through their daily practice, the Santee Dakotas renew their awareness and connection to all of life. Being grateful asks each of us to continuously and sincerely pay attention to our life and to look for those places where we are connected, even when things are not going exactly as we'd like them to.

Yes, it's easy to find things to complain about or to occupy our concern. But life needs something different, something far more powerful, from us. The cause of life needs each of us to find our hope, to reconnect with our appreciation, so that we don't shrivel up in fear and anger. Fear constricts us, but gratitude revitalizes and expands us. Gratitude evolves us spiritually, and life needs us to keep affirming what's going right, so we can't be beaten down with what's not working.

In the service of life, cultivating our ability to experience and express our gratitude becomes an imperative. We have to keep our hope alive by continuing to show up and pay attention - by being thankful for it all - the joy and the pain, moments of surpassing beauty and of mundane simplicity, for laughter and for tears - all of it has been our teacher and a part of the cycle of life.

There are those who say that people get what they deserve in life. Actually, I think we get a whole lot more. When you think about it, there was no true need for beauty or joy, wonder or laughter. I think we must notice our blessings and then find ways to express our gratitude for these undeserved gifts, to "give thanks in all circumstances," and do our share in the work of creation.

I'm honored to be here with you. I'm grateful for this chance to share my perspectives. I appreciate your attention.

I'll end with Anne Lamott's second favorite prayer – Thank you, thank you, thank you. Blessed be.