

The Way of Gratitude  
Deuteronomy 8.7-18  
Uptown Interfaith Thanksgiving Service  
November 25, 2014

I am so glad to be here tonight and so glad to have reached this week.

It has been a long year.

I am going into this Thanksgiving week tired. Are you? I am deeply in need of rest and family and unscheduled days. A morning with that second cup of coffee and cartoon balloons floating in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. I need to be still. I need to be surrounded by people I love and who love me.

Are you feeling heavy from the year?

Think of it all: More than 200 Nigerian girls kidnapped from their school. The continuation of violence between Hamas and Israel. Tens of thousands of unaccompanied children arriving at our southern border. Dramatic stories and spiraling fear of an ebola epidemic. The terrifying headlines of ISIS' impact in Iraq and beyond. The complicated deaths of Robin Williams and Brittany Maynard. Ferguson, Missouri, and the realities of race, and power, and privilege that few of us are prepared to engage. Violence and poverty across this city that we love and call our home yet drive past each day almost blind to the truth of what we should be seeing.

Our own stories that we carry—the aging parent we moved out of the family home and into full-time care, the lost job that we really needed to keep, the struggling child who is beyond our grasp, the estranged neighbor we avoid in the street, the to-do list on our office desk that never gets done. We are carrying it all.

It has been a long year.

I am the mother of two children—a son, 8 1/2, and a daughter, 5 1/2. The "halves" are very important, as you surely know. My daughter was born in early 2009 when my son was not yet three-years-old. I had stepped aside from work for a time to focus on the care of my little ones. "The Sabbath of Motherhood," I called it. Somewhere in that first year of being a mother to two, I was breaking. I was stuck. My daughter was not yet sleeping through the night, my son had begun waking up when he heard her because he knew there were lights on! and diapers being changed! and midnight visits to be made! So we began to change diapers in the night while wearing a headlamp like a

miner heading far beneath the surface of the earth. That's sometimes where I felt I lived. My husband left each morning for interesting, earth-changing work while I hoped for a shower, some sunshine, and possibly getting the kids' naps to overlap.

"Be in this moment," I reminded myself. "The days are long but the years are short," I repeated. "You will miss this when it is over," went the mantra.

But I was stuck. And lonely. And it was hard. And I was so tired.

A friend called one morning for a scheduled conversation, but she caught me unexpectedly when I was unfiltered and quite raw. She reminded me that I was not stuck. That I had choices. And that I needed the light in the darkness that only gratitude can usher in. She suggested I begin to keep a gratitude journal.

I picked up a black-and-white composition notebook and began that day with three things. My journey onto the way of gratitude began by writing just three lines each day.

My daughter's baby fat thigh rolls.  
My husband's flirty wink from across a room.  
My son's huge vocabulary and great laugh.

Organic, fair trade, hot coffee, early in the morning.  
Chocolate chip cookies made from scratch.  
The warm skin on a ripe tomato as it is being picked.

Driving alone with good Public Radio.  
Hot Krispy Kreme doughnuts.  
A quiet moment to reflect on ideas and write them down.

The daily ritual—so common sense, so practical—began to change me. I unclenched my fists and believed my mantras: Be in *this* moment. The days *are* long and the years *are* short. You *will* miss this when it's over. I began to see my life as a gift and began to tell the truth.

The way of gratitude changes us.

Robert Emmons is "the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude" and his research confirms the physical, psychological, and social benefits of embracing gratitude as a life

practice.<sup>1</sup> From stronger immune systems to lower blood pressure, gratitude changes our bodies. We become more alert, more alive, and more awake. Studying “more than one thousand people, from ages eight to 80,” Emmons discovered people who embrace gratitude as an intentional part of daily life are more forgiving, more generous, and feel less lonely.

When we are stuck and tired and afraid, when the year is long and dark, the way of gratitude can welcome us and change us. The first step, as we find in sacred texts, from thorough research, and from our personal experience is awareness of what is good.

In his memoir *Now and Then*, Frederick Buechner calls this the task of listening. “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

Holy listening wakes us up. In naming our gratitude, we are connected back to our Source. And that connection transforms us.

We read together earlier a Divine promise of goodness that abounds in the ordinary places of earth and life: “...a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, <sup>8</sup>a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, <sup>9</sup>a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing...Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ <sup>18</sup>But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power...”

Name what is good. Remember the Source of it. In doing so, we discover the way of gratitude is not private. This is not a practice that allows us to sit in quiet and comfort and just stay there. Nor is this a practice of merely whispering half-hearted thanks. This is about slowly waking up to something true and big in such a way that everything we know might be impacted by the growing force of it. By listening to our lives, by naming what is very good, we are acknowledging the world as it should be amidst the world as it is. And *that* awakening is so significant that, when we stick with it and cultivate the practice, we are transformed for the good of the world.

Practicing gratitude connects us to our Divine Source in such a way that we become empowered to do something about the heavy headlines, the stuckness, the isolation, the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_gratitude\\_is\\_good](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good)

brokenness, the places and systems, inside us and beyond us, that are not as they should be.

“Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior,” writes Anne Lammott. “It almost always makes you willing to be of service,” she jokes, “which is where the joy resides. It means you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and in the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back.”<sup>2</sup>

Lammott has famously written that we need pray only three prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow.

“‘Thanks’ is a huge mind-shift,” she continues, “from thinking that God wants our happy chatter and a public demonstration and is deeply interested in our opinions of the people we hate, to feeling quiet gratitude, humbly and amazingly, without shame at having been so blessed.

You breathe in gratitude, and you breathe it out, too. Once you learn how to do that, then you can bear [something or] someone...unbearable...[The] mystic Rumi said, ‘There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground,’ and bearing the barely bearable is one of the best.

When we go from rashy and clenched to grateful, we sometimes get to note the experience of grace, in knowing that we could not have gotten ourselves from where we were stuck, in hate or self-righteousness or self-loathing...to freedom. The movement of grace in our lives toward freedom *is* the mystery. So we simply say ‘Thanks.’”<sup>3</sup>

That you are here tonight is a testimony to this way. Your presence connects us to each other and moves us toward unleashing something very good in our world. The culture around us would gladly sweep us up into a frenzy of greed and self-obsession. Don’t let them get to you. Let the way of gratitude guide you forward.

The words of Deuteronomy 8 urge us to root ourselves in this way of connected thanksgiving: “*When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them,<sup>13</sup> and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied,<sup>14</sup> then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*”. Do not forget.

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<sup>2</sup> *Help, Thanks, Wow* by Anne Lammott, pp. 56-57

<sup>3</sup> *Help, Thanks, Wow* by Anne Lammott, pp. 60-61

Do not forget what is good.

Do not forget to name it out loud.

Do not forget the Source that gives, the Source that empowers, the Source that connects us to each other.

Do not forget to breathe gratitude in and breathe gratitude out; back into a world that needs it.

May our words of thanksgiving enable us to listen to our lives and to each other.

May our ways of thanksgiving bind us together with such force that we are strengthened to go out from this place as light into great darkness.

May great change in this world-as-it-is, begin with our sincerest words: thank you. thank you. thank you.

Amen.