

Joel 2:21-27
Psalm 126
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Matthew 6:25-33

Christ the King/Giving Thanks
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
November 24, 2024
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Gratitude

Today is the Feast of Christ the King. It's the last Sunday of the church year, the last Sunday of ordinary time, and a time we're invited to pause and think about who or what really reigns in our lives. Pope Pius XI created this Feast Day in 1925, because he wanted to counter the horrible dread, the terrible violence, the reign of evil people had experienced in the Great War and its aftermath. He wanted to create an outward and visible sign that dominion belongs to Christ, not to violence, not to war, not to bigotry or hatred, or consumerism, or the free market, or partisan politics or anything else that is of this world. But these days I am exhausted by all the talk of empire and kingdoms and dominion. It doesn't feel helpful or hopeful to me.

Today is also ingathering Sunday, the day we will consecrate all the good and generous gifts this congregation has pledged to St Barnabas. It's a day to be filled with wonder and awe and gratitude, a day to recognize all the goodness and abundance around us. So instead of talking about empire and dominion, we will pause to free ourselves from tension, anxiety, polarization and worry. Today, we will simply give thanks.

What does it really mean to be thankful, to give thanks? In chapel with the preschoolers last week, I talked about Thanksgiving and asked them to tell me one thing they were thankful for. Ice cream, turkey, mommy and daddy were the clear winners. Which was interesting. Ice cream and turkey, things someone gives us, represent one way of looking at gratitude, the way of benefactor and beneficiary. Someone gives, and someone receives, and the recipient owes a debt of gratitude to the giver. Being grateful for mommy and daddy represents another way of gratitude which is relational. While food and clothing and all the other things Jesus spoke of in our gospel reading today are necessities in life, it is the relationships in our lives that evoke a kind of gratitude without the dualism that makes one person the benefactor and the other, the recipient who then owes a debt of gratitude. Relationships evoke a kind of gratitude where everyone gives and everyone receives the benefit of the gift. It's sacramental, when you think about it. Relationships – with people, with animals, with creation - are all outward and visible signs of God's unspeakable grace, and they make us grateful. It works the other way too. Our gratitude for our relationships makes our relationships even richer. As Christians, we believe that God is the giver of all good gifts, including every moment of every day, which means we have the opportunity to be grateful every moment of every day.

Gratitude can be a beautiful spiritual practice, one we can practice by thanking God for specific things each day by praying, keeping a gratitude journal or gratitude jar, by saying "thank you" at every opportunity, or by coming to church on Sunday to celebrate Holy Eucharist. Did you know

that our Eucharist is called the Great Thanksgiving? The word "thanks" is rooted in the Greek word "eucharistia." It means "thanksgiving." Grace and gratitude both come from that same root, and that's important too.

Grace, God's unmerited favor toward us, speaks of gifts freely given without consideration for return, without debt. Knowing there is nothing we can do to make God love us, and there is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us, is the most lavish gift of all. Our response isn't to pay it back, we could never do that. Our response, when we really take in the reality of God's love and grace, is to pay it forward in gratitude. Hearts filled with gratitude see the world in a profoundly loving way. It's so beautiful, and yet sometimes it feels so impossible. I know there are some among us who aren't feeling so grateful these days. But that's when we need to remember that all the parts are true. That the moon is still beautiful, that there are people who love us, that beauty berry and snowberries bloom long into winter, that we can be nourished by our church community to go out into the world to do the work God has given us to do. There are opportunities for gratitude everywhere, we just miss them because we're preoccupied, because we're busy, because we're worried.

Gratitude doesn't so much have to do with our circumstances, what we have and don't have, as it has to do with paying attention. Did you notice that water came out of the tap when you turned it on? Were you grateful? Did you notice that your spouse cleared your dishes from the dinner table? Were you grateful? Did you notice that your concern about our planet has caused you to recycle all your plastic? Were you grateful? You see, the more we notice, the more grateful we become, which makes us notice even more, which makes us more grateful. It's a lovely circle that has everything to do with seeing the opportunities that are freely given to us each moment, including the gift of being alive in this very moment. That is a gift I am very grateful for.

When we are worried, we become distracted and it's hard to notice all the beauty, awe and wonder in the world. It's hard to recognize God's grace, the unmerited favor God is heaping on us every moment of every day no matter what else is happening. It's what Jesus was talking about in our gospel reading today. *"I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Consider the lilies of the field..."*

This passage can sound simplistic, even unrealistic, seeming to say we don't need to concern ourselves with anything because God loves us more than God loves the birds, which I don't actually believe. That isn't at all what Jesus is saying. What Jesus is telling us here is that we are overly occupied by worry and anxiety which is a result of not recognizing the grace of God that envelopes us. And not recognizing God's love and grace separates us from God, which disables our ability to be grateful, which keeps us from recognizing God's love and grace, which separates us from God...

It's a different kind of circle, and not a good one. Worry about having enough, about being enough, even worry about other people having enough separates us from God. Worry takes our eyes off of Jesus. It distracts us from what we need to be paying attention to, like taking care of the planet or ourselves or the man leaning against the overpass wall, who is trying to keep his pants from falling down while he is talking to people we cannot see. Worry encourages us to believe that we need to be the savior, when we already have one.

I know that telling ourselves not to worry doesn't work. But I have come to understand that there is a way to ease our worry and anxiety, and that is to slow down, even to stop. Stop looking at the news the moment you wake up and take that waking moment as an opportunity to thank God for a good sleep or even a bad sleep, in a warm bed in a home that provides shelter, with another day of living and loving before you. Notice the light or the dark or the rain or the Holy Spirit there with you. Stop your busy mind in the middle of the day and look up. Notice the gifts in front of you – the picture on your desk, the books piled on the table, the candle you lit when you sat down. Stop. Stop and say thank you. God is all around us pouring gifts into our lives, but we have to stop, to make space, to notice, so that we can be grateful, which helps us notice, which makes us grateful, which makes us happy. And when we have stopped long enough, when we've made the quiet space to recognize God's love and grace so that we are living lives that are outwardly grateful, we will have what we need to go out into the world to do the work God has given us to do.

Even though my preaching professor taught me never to give anybody else the last word in a sermon, I am going to leave you with the words of Brother David Steindl-Rast, 99 year-old author, scholar, and Benedictine monk who is beloved the world over for his enduring message about gratefulness as the true source of lasting happiness.

There is a wave of gratefulness because people are becoming aware how important [gratitude] is and how this can change our world. It can change our world in immensely important ways, because if you're grateful, you're not fearful, and if you're not fearful, you're not violent. If you're grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people, and you are respectful to everybody.¹

Gratitude changes everything. I am so very grateful for you. Amen.

¹ <https://grateful.org/resource/want-to-be-happy-be-grateful/> accessed 11/23/24