

Grateful in the Midst of It All
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Thanksgiving:

Something in our hearts yearns to speak gratitude for the gifts of life:

For food on the table and a roof overhead,
For blue skies and gray, sunlight and rain,
For friends who listen, neighbors who help, love overflowing.

For quiet moments alone,
For excitement, passion, and action,
For tasks to do that fit our hands and hearts and minds,
For ideas that inspire and principles that guide.

For the knowledge, for the experience, that we are connected with one another and with all life.

For all this and more may we lift up grateful hearts, even in the midst of whatever else life has brought to us this season.

Let us pause in the silence, and amidst whatever measure of joy or sorrow may be ours today, let us be grateful for this shared time of renewal, prayer, and meditation.

Reading – by Rev. Barbara Pescan

May the glory of the passing away of autumn
lie about us
fresh gold
for a time.
And when the dark comes, and the cold
may we remember how today we stand in glory,
how we walk in bounty
heaped upon earth's dark carpet,
how we move knee deep in abundance
flung against night's winter curtain.
We are thankful for its coming
and for its passing.

Let it be.

Sermon

Some stories are worth repeating. This morning I repeat the story I shared many Thanksgivings ago of Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables."

As the tale begins, Jean Valjean has been convicted of stealing a loaf of bread, and is then released on parole after nineteen years.

An ex-convict, he is treated by most like dirt, less than fully human.

The Bishop, however, sees him in rags on the street, brings him in, feeds him an elegant dinner, and offers him a comfortable place to stay.

And what does Valjean do in return? When the house is quiet, he puts the silver goblets and place settings from that elegant dinner into his pack.

He runs from the Bishop's home yet is immediately caught by the police. He claims the Bishop gave him the silver; the police find the story farfetched. But the Bishop, hearing the commotion, comes out, sees what has happened, and affirms that indeed he had given Valjean the silver. More than that, he tells Valjean he shouldn't have rushed away so quickly, for he had forgotten the silver candlesticks – he had left the best behind.

Jean Valjean is stunned. He has never been treated this way. He has never received a gift so unexpected, so undeserved, received a gift simply because he is a human being, simply because he "has a soul" in the Bishop's language – an idea which is utterly new and completely foreign to him.

What is Valjean's response? He is transformed. His entire life becomes a life of mercy and service and love. His entire life becomes a kind of thanks-giving. Yes, he becomes a worldly success, but never forgets the lesson of grace and generosity – as he raises the daughter, Cossette, of a worker in his factory, Fontine, who has died; as he saves the man, Marius, who Cossette loves; and on it goes.

Yet... he is dogged throughout by the police inspector, Javert, who is obsessed in his determination to catch Valjean, who had broken his parole; Javert, who believes that a human being can never change, that a thief is always a thief.

Well, near the end of the story Valjean has it in his power to kill Javert. And Javert fully expects Valjean to kill him – it is, after all, what Javert would do if the positions were reversed.

But instead... Valjean sets Javert free.

Javert is now the one who has received a most unexpected gift, and this from a most unlikely source. Yet he does not know how to respond. For in Javert's moral universe everything must be earned – an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. He simply cannot comprehend the kind of gift of life and mercy that Valjean has presented him. He does not understand that kind of world; further, he can't begin to imagine how he could live in Valjean's debt – in debt to this criminal. Javert, unlike Valjean, is beyond the possibility of transformation so... far from transforming his life... he ends it.

Well, what kind of moral universe, what kind of world, do we feel *we* live in? Valjean's or Javert's?

I expect that most of us, most human beings, do live with at least one foot some of the time, maybe much of the time, in the world of Valjean, the world in which we recognize that so much is given to us which has nothing whatsoever to do with whether or not we "deserve" it,

given to us simply because we are alive and human, “have a soul” – first of all the gift of life itself... an unexpected gift indeed from a source shrouded in mystery.

Yet we probably also have a toe at least, maybe sometimes a foot in the world of Javert, that world in which we believe we should only get what we have earned – a day’s work, a day’s pay; that world in which reward and punishment for good deeds and bad is carefully doled out, no mercy given or expected. And there is of course validity to this world; it is how the world of commerce and work and legal justice turns; we need this world... in its place. But to live as if this world of Javert is *all* that there is, is to live a cold and dry existence at best, an existence (for it is not truly a *life*) in which there is no room for mercy or compassion or love.

Well then... how do we make room for mercy and compassion and love? Does it begin with gratitude? I think it does: With the open-hearted, full-bodied realization that there is indeed much, beginning with life itself, that is given us regardless of anything we have done to earn or deserve it? Gratitude.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul said we should “give thanks in all circumstances.” Absurd? Not if we hear his words with care. For Paul didn’t say give thanks *for* all circumstances, he wasn’t affirming that all circumstances have some higher purpose or meaning – for which we should somehow be grateful – even the circumstances most tragic or filled with suffering. Because some things simply *are* rotten and unfair.

No, Paul was reminding his readers – and us – that nurturing an “attitude of gratitude” even in the midst of tough times is simply good for our souls, is a spiritually healthy way to live – maybe makes room for mercy, compassion, and love.

Peter Fleck, writing of the Pilgrims’ legendary first Thanksgiving, affirmed his belief that the Pilgrims were not so much giving thanks because they had survived; rather, Fleck writes, “It seems to me that they were able to survive because they were thankful,” that having cultivated this habit of the heart made them more resilient in adversity. (And I don’t know about you, but the most resilient people I know are often those who have most deeply integrated gratitude into their lives and hearts, who are still giving thanks from their hospital bed or in the midst of their grief – and who are often also filled to overflowing with mercy, compassion, and love.)

We humans can be slow learners, though, and often about the most important realities of our lives – gratitude included – gratitude, which includes a certain letting go, which is not always easy.

One winter a number of years ago, as a few of you may remember, I came down with a little case of pneumonia. For days before it was actually diagnosed I struggled against the deepening cough and the growing fatigue. After all, I had to teach my class. I had to preach. There was so much I had to do.

Finally I had no choice. The diagnosis was in. I was beat. And the instructions were clear.

So... class members could lead the class. A colleague could preach. Susan could make sure I stayed in bed and could bring me soup. In other words, I finally allowed myself to let others care for me – which they wanted to do of course... if I would let them. To put it another way, I left Javert’s moral universe, the world in which I had responsibilities I had to fulfill, agreements to keep, and so on, and I entered Jean Valjean’s, the world of gifts and care freely given and received. My role for those days? Simply to accept the gifts and care and to be grateful. And what an opening of the heart I experienced in that letting go into gratitude.

So... the trick of living a happier, even joyful, more open-hearted and compassionate life – in the midst of it all? It may be as simple as more intentionally nurturing that response of gratitude every day – not waiting until misfortune knocks us down and we have no choice but to accept with gratitude the help of others. Instead... thank you every day sun for warming me; thank you every day, every moment, trees for breathing out oxygen for me; thank you farmers and truckers and merchants for feeding me; thank you dear ones for loving me and caring for me.

And our deepest, most all-embracing “thank you”? In Maya Angelou’s words on your order of worship: “Thank you Lord for life and all that’s in it.” Lord? Read it how you will: God, Tao, Brahman, Spirit... the ineffable, unnamable creative and sustaining mystery.

And with each “thank you” the heart opens, does it not, to that happier, more joyful life? Further, in the opening of the heart we experience, once again we experience that we are not alone – and so, yes, of course we become more resilient *because* we are not alone in or against the universe; rather, we live and work within a fabric of sustaining care and love – mercy and compassion.

For our “thanks” turns so naturally to giving, a nourishing circle of life in which it often becomes hard to tell who is giving and who is receiving.

This Thanksgiving, then – at least one day dedicated to gratitude in the midst of it all – may we stop between courses, stop even before we begin, and notice the gifts. And give thanks, knowing that in giving thanks – to one another and to the sources of our lives – we will be nourishing more than our bodies, we will be nourishing grateful hearts, hearts that will more naturally overflow in blessing and service to others.

For example, blessing those pictured on our Guest at Your Table boxes, blessing them with our gifts as we sit down to our meal. In the spirit of the Bishop feeding Valjean that elegant dinner.

Thanks turning to giving. So that we will be living more of the time not in Javert’s, but in Valjean’s moral universe, the world as we would like it to be more of the time, the world as we can help it to become... or perhaps as it already is... had we but eyes to see, hearts open enough to feel.

So may it be.