

Gratitude Always?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 22, 2020

Readings

from the Supreme Medicine Man of the Wampanoag Nation,
John Peters, also known as Slow Turtle (1930-2013):

Great Spirit, I thank you today

Mother Earth, I thank you –
Grandmother Moon, I thank you-
Grandfather Sun, I thank you

I offer thanks to the four directions
To the east - To the south - To the west - To the north

I thank you for all my relations
The winged nation
Creeping and crawling nation
The four-legged nation
The green and growing nation
And all things living in the water

Honoring the clans:
The deer - The bear - The wolf - The turtle - The snipe

Great Spirit, I thank you on this day.

from *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, by Brother David Steindl-Rast

Suddenly everything is simple. We can drop all the big, cumbersome terms. Gratefulness says it all. And gratefulness is something all of us know from experience. Can the spiritual life be that simple? Yes, what we secretly hoped is true: it is all that simple. It is this very simplicity, in fact, that we find most difficult. But why not drop the complications we put in our own way? What brings fulfillment is gratefulness, the simple response of our heart to this given life in all its fulness.

Sermon

*You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant;
You can get anything you want... at Alice's Restaurant.
Walk right in, it's around the back,
Just a half mile from the railroad track.
You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant.*

I play Alice's Restaurant every Thanksgiving. And usually get others in our family to sing with me.

And here's the thing: We sing whether it has been a good year or a rough year or more likely a mixed year; we sing whether we are holding fresh grief in our lives and hearts or whether everything is going beautifully for everyone in our family.

We sing. This year, too, I'll sing Alice's restaurant with whomever wants to join in, even on a chaotic Zoom call. But we will sing.

As for this song. Well, of course you can't actually get anything you want... at Alice's Restaurant or anywhere else. Can't make Covid disappear magically, can't end climate change with a wave of the hand or a song, and can't bring a loved one back to the table.

But you can get love... by giving love. Don't even have to go to Alice's Restaurant or anywhere other than your own home or a Zoom screen.

My theme today is "Gratitude Always?" So I wonder: Is it gratitude that enables us to sing no matter what?

I think it might be so – because practicing gratitude helps us to notice the gifts in our lives... no matter what: including above all the gift of love... in the midst of everything, and most especially in the midst of hardship, struggle, and sorrow.

A story is told (and I've shared it before) of a Thanksgiving dinner on a hot and humid day. (Probably not in New England!) The family had invited a large number of guests to share the meal, and as they sat down the exhausted mother of the family said to her young son, "Sidney, will you please say grace before we start the meal?"

"But, Mom," said Sidney, "I don't know what to say."

"Oh, just say what you've heard me say," replied his Mom.

So everyone bowed their heads and Sidney spoke: "Oh, Lord, why did I invite all these people here on a sweltering day like this?"

(adapted from *Humorous Stories about the Human Condition*, edited by Eric W. Johnson)

Well, we all have our moments! Of course how much better if Sidney... or his mother... had stayed with the simple words of Meister Eckhart, who wrote many centuries ago that if the only prayer we ever said was "Thank you," it would be enough.

"Thank you." It is enough.

Sounds easy, certainly is or should be easy in good times. But how easy in hard times?

"Thank you"... when you've just lost your job?

“Thank you”... as you face illness or loss or face any of the variants of “hard times” that can befall us human beings?

“Thank you”... if a dear one in your life is very ill or has died?

“Thank you”... in the midst of Covid and post-election chaos?

“Thank you?”

Yet paradoxically that often *is* one of our human responses... not *to* hard times, but in the midst of hard times. (Though maybe not always our first response – understandably!)

For this is not (of course not) about being grateful *for* whatever suffering has befallen us. But the hard time can remind us of those things for which we are still grateful, remind us of what we still have, remind us, for example, of the gifts still in our lives, remind us of the support and love we have to help us through the hard times. And so, remind us to give thanks.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul said we should “give thanks in all circumstances.” 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. 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 – and maybe makes room for mercy, compassion, and love.

Many years ago (we were in our twenties) a dear friend of ours almost died from an infection resulting from a burst appendix. As we sat over a bowl of soup during her recovery, she said she had been reminded of what really matters in life and what doesn’t matter so much. She found herself not grateful for all that she’d been through, but more grateful than usual for the simple things we too often take for granted – that bowl of soup for example, and friends to share it with.

When I fell and broke my elbow a couple of years ago, gratitude was not my first response – but as time went on I was immensely grateful above all for the care of those who love me, and for the medical care and skill that put my elbow back together and then the physical therapy that restored my full function.

On a much larger scale: On November 22, 57 years ago, President Kennedy was shot and killed. And even in the midst of that unspeakable tragedy, though our first response was surely not gratitude, we discovered with time that we could be very grateful for the continuity of our national institutions, the resilience of our republic. And I am grateful for our parents, who held us in love through those terrible days.

This year we are in the midst of national turmoil and division, with a president who, in my opinion is sowing this turmoil and division while claiming without a shred of evidence that the election was rigged. Yet, for all that, I am grateful for election officials and judges across the nation of both parties who it seems to me have done and are doing their jobs with dedication to their work and to our Constitution.

Personally, I find my day improved if I remember to take a few moments to write in my journal some of the many things for which I am grateful, nurturing daily the attitude of gratitude

whatever else the day brings. No need to deny the things that might distress or worry me; they are there unbidden and need to be addressed in due course. But they are better addressed if I first remind myself of all for which I am grateful in the midst of whatever else. Echoing Brother David Steindl-Rast, it sometimes really might be as simple as that.

And our deepest, most all-embracing “thank you”? In poet Maya Angelou’s words: “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.

Finally, note this: With each “thank you” the heart opens, does it not, opens to... life... to more joyful living? Further, in the opening of the heart we have a better chance of experiencing once again that we are not alone – so we become more resilient *because* we are not alone, because we have been reminded that we live and work within a fabric of sustaining care and love – mercy and compassion.

Then our “thanks” often turns so naturally to giving (paying it forward as we sometimes say), a nourishing circle of life in which it often becomes hard to tell who is giving and who is receiving.

Well, this Thanksgiving will be a different Thanksgiving than any in our lifetimes – no large gatherings except maybe on Zoom. It may be lonely for many.

Perhaps, then, all the more important to take note of those things for which we can still be grateful... knowing that in giving thanks – to one another and to the sources of our lives – we will be nourishing this Thanksgiving more than our bodies. We will be nourishing grateful hearts, hearts that will more naturally overflow in blessing and service to others, the circle ever unbroken.

Wishing you all many blessings this season... and always.

Blessed be. Amen. So may it be.