

Practicing Gratitude

A sermon for the Evanston Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

November 23, 2011

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Good evening friends. It is good to be with you on this day before Thanksgiving. As you've heard, I'm the Director of Faith in Place, which works with religious congregations around Illinois region, to give religious people tools to become better stewards of creation. We work on renewable energy, energy conservation, direct markets for local and sustainable farmers, water conservation and policy advocacy in partnership with more than 800 congregations of all faiths up and down the state.

This all started with the Evanston Interreligious Sustainability Circle back in 1999, so it's particularly delightful to find myself here this evening. And I've been asked to say something about the relationship between faith, gratitude, and concern for the earth.

That is not a made-up connection, in my opinion. I believe that the discipline of gratitude is central to religious life. It helps with a sense of contentment, and sufficiency, necessary to appreciate the many blessings that all of us enjoy who are able to sit in this room together this evening. And that sense of sufficiency and blessing is also key to learning to want less, and to separate the sense of want from the knowledge of actual need. Separating those two things, while un-American, is necessary to the long-term sustainability of our planet.

I have contemplated the practice of gratitude at the worst times in my own life. It feels more necessary to me when it's harder. When one of my children was giving me good reason to worry (don't ask me which one, I won't tell you). When my husband got sick. I needed to remember at those times how comparatively lucky I was. I've never

gone hungry. I've never not had a roof over my head. I've had the privilege of lots of education which for me means the privilege of dancing with the whole history of human ideas – wonderful thoughts to fill my head. If I'd been born earlier in human history, particularly as a woman, I wouldn't have gotten to have that experience and it's one that I value greatly. I get to do meaningful work with people I love, and when I'm tempted to complain about the difficulties of running a non-profit with seven mouths to feed during a dreadful recession I remember that we're still here. Still here largely thanks to the generosity of strangers.

It's the mixture of that sense of hurtling through the universe toward your own death and what a poet described as the blue starry strangeness of being here at all that keep me in the mode of saying thank you.

When I'm walking down the street I think "thank you." When I lie down to rest I think "thank you."

I started this practice when I was going through a particularly frightening time with the child who worries me. I started saying it because I couldn't sleep, because everything was a source of stress, because work was doubtful and difficult, and there was no down time at home either. So I started each day with a prayer of thanksgiving, because I knew that if I said the words often enough eventually I would remember to feel them, and things would get better. They did. I have been recalled to gratitude – to the great blessings of my life.

I really haven't shared with you a partial litany of my troubles to burden you with them. As I said, I am an astonishingly lucky woman, surrounded by great blessings of meaningful work, loving family, wonderful husband, comfortable home. The heat's on,

there's food in the fridge, I can afford to buy books and take the time to read them. I couldn't be luckier. I live better than 2/3 of the world. I'm insisting on putting my amazing good fortune into perspective for you because I'm about to insist that you are lucky too, and I don't want you assuming that I've never known any trouble my own self.

But I know when I'm well off, and I hope you do also. I'm not climbing on a garbage heap sorting trash to make my living. I'm not selling tortillas on a streetcorner. I'm not carrying water 2 miles each way three or four times a day. The water comes right out of my tap, and it's clean. One of my children may worry me but both of them survived to adulthood. I have no medical conditions that can't be treated, and I have a good doctor and insurance.

More than lucky, I'm blessed. Is there anyone out there who can't say the same?

Saying thank you is a religious discipline. It's one I would encourage because I think that so much of what gets aimed at us in our society encourages us to be ungrateful. We do expect things to be perfect, and it seems that the standard for perfect just keeps going up. Obviously, it's in someone's interest that we feel dissatisfied. Perhaps the people who sell things.

Yes, I think it might be them.

When we are here together for worship and celebration we are not the people who sell things (even if we are those people the rest of the time). We are the people who are grateful to God, and by God I mean whatever I mean and whatever you mean by that, or whatever word you use to mean the thing that I mean when I say God.

As a Unitarian Universalist I do not come from a praying tradition. We are more likely to read a poem than a prayer, and to take time at the beginning of a family meal to

reflect on a reading that has some meaning to us than to engage directly in a word of thanksgiving.

I'm not here to argue you out of your family building practices – whatever they are they are weight on the right side of the scale, and there can't be too much of that. But I would suggest that there is a difference between taking some quiet and centered time to reflect on some idea or story that you think is interesting, and actually directly expressing your gratitude for the food you're about to eat. And maybe gratitude for having survived another day while you're about it.

There is a difference between playing with a thought and saying thank you like you mean it. One allows you a little distance. The other doesn't. Prayer is an act of religious intimacy.

Some people are good at this. I live an interfaith life and I work with some pastors who can pray you right off your feet. Some of them are here with me tonight I have no doubt. I admire their facility.

I just don't have that much to say.

But I believe in the power of thank you. So my prayer is a simple one: "Thank you for this meal and this day." By which I mean thank you for the people who grew the food and who sold it to Irv and Shelly and who put it in my order and who brought it to my door. Thank you for the farmers who grew the chicken or the cow (I might know them) and all the ones I don't know who grew the good things that I am lucky enough to sit down at the end of a day in a comfortable, warm dry room with someone I love and eat. Thank you for the truckdrivers and the grocery store workers. Thank you for the people who made the paper it came wrapped in. Keep them all safe. Send them home to

their families for a good meal at the end of the day, and send them home saying thank you.

Thank you for the earth that still holds fertile soil. Thank you for the rain that came in time and for the sprinkler system when it didn't. Thank you for the lake, for the good, good water.

Thank you for the time to cook, and the ability to read a cook book. Thank you for Fannie Farmer. Thank you for taste. Thank you for warmth and for a light at the dinner table now that the days are getting short.

Thank you for another day of work done as well as I can and perhaps useful to somebody. Thank you for another day tomorrow to do better. Thank you that I'm still here. Thank you that I'm not here alone. Thank you for the goodness of the people I passed this day with. Thank you for the books I will read after I've washed the dishes. Thank you for a mind to think with. Thank you for a thousand theories about who you are – about who I'm talking to when I say thank you. Thank you for the struggle which keeps me from getting soft, even though I'm getting soft.

Thank you for the encouragement that comes every day in a thousand ways. Thank you for the good people who walk in our doors just when I'm about to give up again.

Thank you for this spoonful of soup, this bite of salad, thank you.

That's what I mean.

What I say is: "Thank you for this meal and this day."

You're probably miles ahead of me already. Maybe you sing blessings at the start of the meal, maybe you say the Hebrew blessing for the breaking of bread. I forget how that one goes in Hebrew but what it means is basically "thank you for the bread."

The act of prayer is a discipline of the mind. It is the trick of happiness – being satisfied with what you already have. The practice of gratitude will make you content. Which reinforces the practice of gratitude.

Count your blessings your mother might have told you growing up. If we can keep our eyes on the incomparable worth and beauty of the gift of life we won't be fooled by those who have it in their interest to draw our attention away – toward the petty dissatisfaction of everyday consumerism. And if we could learn the secret of contentment, we could stop destroying the beauty and complexity of the natural world with our insatiable appetite for more, and more, and more.

Gratitude is also an ecological practice, you see. All disciplines of personal integration are ecological practices, it turns out. That's why someone like me, who spends her days as an advocate for the earth in a faith context must also be an advocate for the kinds of religious practices that can lead to a life lived well and carefully on the surface of the only habitable planet – the one we share with the only life we've ever been able to find in the universe.

Tomorrow we will share this day of national Thanksgiving with a frightened group of retail merchants who want us to leave our families early and start the Christmas shopping season (a tradition which should be an abomination for those who celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday and a woeful practice for everyone else). Instead let's take that pregnant moment before the turkey is sliced or the tofu passed and remind

ourselves that being here is extraordinary, having family a blessing, that food is delicious and we are grateful for it. Let's say thank you.

And when we've thanked God for the grace of another day and all its blessings, then we might thank whoever cooked the dinner at our house, and whoever's gonna wash the dishes after. And then the conversations that can happen at our tables will be embedded in gratitude. And then we will resist the temptation to buy things we don't need with money we don't have and instead will concentrate on being grateful for the beauty that already surrounds us in such wild abundance.

You don't have to remind me that it's dark times out there. You don't have to remind me about the trip to the emergency room or the CT scan, the doctor coming in with the grave face, the call from the stranger about your child. I've been there myself. You don't have to tell me that the transition to non-fossil fuel derived sources of energy isn't going so well. Those are excuses for a lack of gratitude. The habit of saying thank you every day is the single most powerful religious practice I know of. Thank you, as you wait for the bone to be set. Thank you as you drive out again to another late night. Thank you as you leave the meeting at 11 and only three people came. Thank you as another foundation turns you down. If you are still drawing breath you should still be using it to say thank you.

Thank you because the complex beauty of this life is with you as an act of grace every second that the air is in your lungs. Thank you because the last thing we say before dying should be thank you.

Thank you. And Amen.