

Sermon for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 28, Year C

November 18, 2007 Randal B. Gardner

Few of life's practices are more uplifting, more emotionally rewarding, and more relationship strengthening than the practice of giving thanks. The Roman poet Cicero said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others."

I had a seminary professor named Charles W. Taylor, who was my most important mentor in those formative years. Charles had had a number of years of parish experience, which is surprisingly rare in seminary faculties. He was a large man, ample in just about every way. He had a quick wit and made himself generously available to his students.

He had a knack for boiling down volumes of theology and philosophy and psychology into a single quip. One of his favorites was, "Never trust a two-eyed literalist." Jesus had said that if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; and Charles' little commentary on that was that any biblical literalist who still had two eyes wasn't really. A literalist. Another of his quips was, "The reason God wants people to get married is that it's impossible to nail your own hands to the cross." That was his way of contending that there are few better ways in this life to die to self than to commit yourself to loving and living with another person.

In about the middle of the middle quarter of the middle year of seminary, my classmates and I came to Charles' seminar in one, big shared, mutual, growing bad mood. It was about four in the afternoon on about the fourth rainy day in a row. The work had piled up, and it felt like this would be the condition of our lives for all eternity.

Charles spent about ten minutes trying to engage us in the seminar topic for the day, but we were impossible. Sullen. Grumpy. Curt. Probably rude. Wouldn't laugh at his jokes. Impossible.

Charles called a time-out. "This will not work. I am not willing to waste my time with a bunch of people in such a lousy mood." That was about all we needed. The litany of complaints started, and it was clear we were ready to use the whole hour and half unloading them. "Wait," he said. "Before you tell me about how bad things are, I want you to tell me about things you're grateful for. For the next ten minutes I don't want to hear about anything but what you're thankful for."

That was about the last thing any of us wanted to do, but we grudgingly obliged him. At some point one of my best friends offered something heartfelt: "I'm glad my sister is responding well to a new cancer drug." Then a little more: "I'm thankful for my daughter's birthday next week." "I'm thankful for being healthy." "I'm thankful for having last weekend with my brother."

Ten minutes is a long time. You can say a lot in ten minutes. We started to dig deeper. We started to reflect on more areas of our lives. We started giving thanks for our classes. For the seminary. For the church. We started to laugh once in awhile. Then we started laughing a lot. We began to give thanks for each other, for friendship, for a safe place to be grumpy.

Charles let us keep going. I think we went around that table for almost an hour, and by the end of it we had all laughed those kind of body cleansing laughs that bring tears to the eyes. We had shared parts of our selves with each other we hadn't shared before. I never knew my best friend's sister had cancer until he gave thanks that she was doing better. We were invigorated, happy, optimistic and renewed.

I have no recollection at all of why we were there. I can't remember what we were studying that quarter with Dr. Taylor. I only remember getting one of the best life lessons I've ever learned.

It is true, I think, that the noblest of all the prayers we say is simply "Thank you." The most satisfying reward in the workplace is recognition with gratefulness by others. The most mood altering exercise we can undergo is to pay attention to what we're thankful for, tuning out the other anxieties and worries that cloud our minds. Gratefulness builds optimism. The practice of expressing thanks builds a level of satisfaction that fully encompasses what we call happiness. Saying thank you to someone else is a gift that never wears out.

I keep all the thank you notes that people write to tell me how I did something really helpful for them. When I'm having one of those really bad days where I'm about getting my leg chewed off and everything I touch turns to lead, I'll pull a few notes and reread them. They're like a fresh breeze on a steamy afternoon.

Use this coming holiday to practice a little Thanksgiving. How about a family thank you note to the people that haul away your trash? How about to the members of the local fire station, whom you hope never to meet in person? Take time to tell the grocery store workers how glad you are that you didn't have to shoot the turkey yourself.

Melody Beattie, the author who developed many of the concepts we use to understand co-dependency and addiction, puts it this way.

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.

An Attitude of Gratitude: possibly the best practice of all for a lifetime of happiness and success.

Happy Thanksgiving to you and all you love, and all you know you ought to love.