

Awareness and Gratitude

Thanksgiving Day weekend

Text: Psalm 100:3; Psalm 65:11; Psalm 8:4

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It was my intention some weeks ago to speak to you about awareness, that consciousness that leads us to gratitude and thanksgiving, but when I intended to do that, I didn't intend to do it the way I intend to do it today. What I intend to do today is to review with you the past three Lord's Days that we have experienced together. I don't want simply to move on without us having a moment to reflect on it together and to lift it up into our consciousness in order that through that awareness we may be led to a greater level of thanksgiving.

Three weeks ago was All Saints Day; the dancers lighted a candle as the necrology was read, each person honored, and then with those lights here, they danced in community until one by one they peeled off and went out, hands joined, lights burning, but symbolizing the fact that eventually, one by one, we are all removed from the community, not into the darkness, but into the community of light. I was told, as I myself experienced, that there were not a lot of dry eyes here.

Then we had Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar who had told me absolutely that she would not preach and I could not list what she would do as a sermon and so it had to be an address or a lecture, and she preached to us. A Jewish woman preaching from her scripture. The reason she said she wouldn't preach was that that is to tell the good news of Jesus and she is a Jew, but her insight into her own Hebrew scriptures and into the New Testament documents was illuminating and inspiring and we came to love her with all her humanity, her humaneness, and her humor.

And then last week - what can I say of that whole weekend, culminating in a wonderful worship with Bishop John Shelby Spong? I want to bring to awareness those experiences, the presence of the bishop with us, our sensing his humanity, his grace, his positive demeanor, his pastoral sense - all of that is worth a Sunday morning's reflection, bringing it to awareness.

To be aware - that's a gift of our humanity, to be conscious, to be self-conscious, to be able to get out of our skin and observe ourselves, to feel and to know that we're feeling, to think and to know that we're thinking, to experience and to know that we are experiencing That's consciousness. That's what makes us human. It's a marvelous gift. Some of us have dogs or cats that we love very much, but they just go about their business of living: eating, reproducing, sleeping. They never get out of their skin to understand what they are doing, although now and again there is a dog that seems to have moments of consciousness. But, we do. To be aware. To know what we're doing and why we're doing it, to live with intentionality, to be able to reflect upon our experience, to savor it over again, awareness, consciousness, intentionality. That leads to gratitude, and I want us for a few moments this morning simply to reflect on what we have experienced together. I'll cast it somewhat in a personal mode. It's really the only way I can do it because I'm talking about my story which is your story, but you would have to tell your story also in personal terms.

As we speak personally I think we are speaking communally because we have experienced something together that cannot be taken for granted. There has been a richness here that is unusual, and I don't want us to let it go without awareness in order that we might be truly thankful.

A Jewish woman preaching. A woman preaching That's something that couldn't be taken for granted not very long ago. On the day of my ordination I got a wonderful letter from my father who said that when I was in my mother's womb, he prayed for me and dedicated me to God, if I were a boy. If I were a girl, well, what can you do with a girl?

I remember in 1984 when you graciously gave to Nancy and me a sabbatical. We spent the first three months of '84 in Schenectady in old First Church, and it was an old, grand tradition and a great, old liberal congregation, and for years they had a joint service with the Jewish synagogue once a year. It happened while we were there and it was at the synagogue and we went. We were a part of the congregation. I didn't have any part to play. I remember that I felt somewhat awkward. I didn't know if it was a good thing or not. I'd never known any Jewish people. I wasn't sure whether I should join in the worship in a Jewish synagogue of my God whom I knew only through Jesus Christ, whom I thought at that time superceded the Jewish faith. I still remember my awkwardness. Now I had a Jewish woman preach in my pulpit. Well, I've come a long way, Baby, not only the fact that A. J. was here to preach, but the fact that, getting to know the Jewish community, even coming to envy a bit being Jewish, loving that culture, coming to hold in great affection those people. On All Saints Day we talked about fundamental trust. Then on that Sunday with A. J. here, the gift of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue committee, I spontaneously invited Rabbi Alan Alpert to come and we sang the last verse of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" together as we embraced each other, and someone said, "You know, there were tears all over the place because that was a sign and a symbol of what this community is." I do know that

when I ended the song, I wanted to say to him, "Begin the Benediction in Hebrew," but I didn't have a lot of voice. It touches something very deep and it feels very right.

And then the Bishop comes, purported to be the most controversial churchman in the country, certainly in the mainline Protestant tradition – in the Episcopal Protestant tradition what Hans Küng has been in the Catholic tradition – a gadfly, a catalyst, pushing and probing and needling in order to push the Church into the 21st century, in order to have a faith to express with integrity. I spent 45 minutes on the telephone with the religious editor of *The Grand Rapids Press* addressing all of those controversial comments that are made in newspaper articles. Read those articles and we judge people. It didn't do any good. But then the Bishop comes and here he is as I had promised you, a gentle giant full of grace who comes with that great pastoral heart and who is so impressed with you. You drew from him. On the way to the airport Sunday afternoon he absolutely crashed. He said, "You know, I could have gone another three or four hours with the people there because they energized me." You drew it out of him and he and Christine were so impressed with you. They said in all of their travels, in all of their visitation of churches, they've only had a couple of experiences that would have matched what they sensed in you, what this community has captured. And we had that exhilarating experience of having someone from the outside say gracefully and articulately all of that which we have ever hoped and dreamed to be and to become.

Well, you can't take those kinds of things for granted and we shouldn't just let them pass by. So, I'm spending another Lord's Day simply savoring it in order to bring it to consciousness, in order to come to a deeper awareness, in order that we might be grateful, adequate to the gift that God has given us. As I think of all of that, let me just say it in a couple of items here, reflecting on it.

I'm so very grateful for the awareness I have that fundamental trust in God is prior to, independent of, and more important than my specific belief system. My little belief system, oh, it's a grand system, it's a grand tradition, but my little Christian faith tradition is but a pointer to a Mystery that cannot be grasped, comprehended in a belief structure. I have a fundamental trust in a God who transcends my little tradition, and the respective, great traditions of the world. They're all important and they're all good, some more adequate than others as pointers to the Absolute Mystery, but all of them simply human constructs through which one is moved to the experience of the Ultimate. The Bishop said it very simply and very clearly, that distinction between the experience of God and the explanation of the experience. The explanation is relative; the experience is the thing. The explanation is always in terms of one's immediate context and one's world view and one's understanding of reality so that it's always time anchored and limited and always needs to be restructured and refreshed and revisioned, re-imagined. The structure itself, be it Christian faith or Jewish faith or Buddhist meditation, all of those are simply human belief constructs that

would point us beyond themselves to the God beyond all tribal gods, in whom we lose ourselves in that abyss of love.

I am aware that I have journeyed a long way. I am aware that I have moved from a very conservative, exclusive, defensive Christian to an unabashed, unapologetic pluralist, and have a freedom and a joy and a celebration in my religious faith such as I never would have thought possible years ago. That is an awareness that brings gratitude, and gratitude causes one to be humble and gives one deep joy. That's the awareness that I have in reflection, and I hope you do, too, because we have traveled a long road and we've come to a beautiful place, and it is the place for which I believe the world is longing, that place of grace, full of love, where we stand before the infinite and inexhaustible ground of our being, who calls us to live fully, to love wastefully, and to be all that we can be.