

Only a Poem Will Do

When Gratitude Fills the Heart

Psalm 16:5-11; Philippians 4:4-7; Matthew 6: 25-34

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St. John's Episcopal Church
Grand Haven, Michigan
Thanksgiving Service, November 20, 2011

My good friend Ed Post said to me once, "You would have been really good if you had had time to think!" Whether he was right or not, I'm not sure but this I know: too much time to think can be the paralysis of preaching. Preaching only every once in a while, I have too much time to think about it. Certain ideas emerge and some sense of what I want to say rests off in the fog. Maybe if I take you on a journey with me you will sense what I am wrestling with and then you can figure out, if you are interested, how you would deal with the questions and issues I am thinking about.

If I had been smart I would have announced the meditation title "God, Grace and Gratitude":

*God, the source, ground and goal of being, of human being;
Grace, the mode of God's action;
Gratitude, the spontaneous response of human beings in face of such grace.*

Three "G's" offering good movement and who would argue with that as we move toward Thanksgiving Day?

That really is what I want to say; that is what I really do believe and experience and attempt to practice.

But I've been carrying around a question with me as I've been pointing to this meditation: *Does gratitude need an object?* When gratitude is experienced as a feeling or attitude is it gratitude *for* something or someone or gratitude *to* an agent or agency that provided that for which one is grateful?

Perhaps you say, no need for the *to* or the *for*; gratitude is a stand-alone feeling – a general, unfocused feeling of being thankful. I suspect that is true of most of us at one time or another. However, what if we are pressed – for what are you feeling grateful? To whom are you feeling grateful? Would there not be a person or institution or agency that would come into focus as the trigger of your sense of wellbeing causing the feeling of gratitude?

In his work *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt asks,

Why do some people find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life, but others do not? (p. xiii)

He explains how he pursues this question:

I begin with the culturally widespread idea that there is a vertical, spiritual dimension of human existence. Whether it is called nobility, virtue, or divinity, and whether or not God exists, people simply do perceive sacredness, holiness, or some ineffable goodness in others, and in nature. (p. xiii)

In sum, Haidt claims there is a human capacity to be “elevated” in face of some extraordinary human deed or some experience of natural beauty. He writes,

My claim is that the human mind perceives a third dimension, a specifically moral dimension that I will call “divinity.”

Well, I relax and begin to smile. Here is a fine scholar in the relatively new field of positive psychology who sees in the human a dimension he calls “divinity.” But I am quickly let down as he continues,

In choosing the label “divinity,” I am not assuming that God exists and is there to be perceived. (I myself am a Jewish atheist.) Rather, my research on the moral emotions has led me to conclude that the human mind simply does perceive divinity and sacredness, whether or not God exists. (p. 183f)

Arriving at this conclusion, Haidt confesses he lost the “smug contempt for religion” he felt in his twenties. He came to recognize “the ancient truth that devoutly religious people grasp, and that secular thinkers often do not:

That by our actions and our thoughts, we move up and down on a vertical dimension. (p. 184)

But, before I see an opening for God, Haidt clarifies,

Even atheists have intimations of sacredness, particularly when in love or in nature. We just don’t infer that God caused those feelings. (p. 193)

Does gratitude need an object? – my question as I mull over thoughts for this meditation. Haidt would deny that; something in us elevates in face of natural beauty or human love but gratitude is a stand-alone feeling; it is triggered by natural phenomena but no need to go to the Ground of Being, no need for being in all of its manifestations to have a ground, a source, or meaningful goal.

For one nurtured in and immersed in the biblical tradition, that left me unsatisfied.

Does gratitude need an object?

My sense, my deepest intuition, is that it does, or, perhaps I could say, it seems natural. We teach our children to say thank you – *you*. We experience a flaming sunset, we view the raging white water surf or listen to the gentle lapping of the waves on the shore. We gaze on the blackness of the heavens sprinkled with stars as diamonds. We see the beauty and wonder of a child. We feel the rush of love, the experience of care, the expression of tenderness, and for us it is most natural to feel, to express, “Thank God!”

In Israel’s tradition the Psalms were the hymnbook expressing that vertical movement of the soul which Haidt describes. Expressions of praise, thanksgiving, and worship, expression of lament and pleading, expressions of joy and celebration. The whole spectrum of human emotion was brought to expression before the God of Israel.

The Psalter lesson, Psalm 16:5-11, expresses beautifully the sense of wellbeing and consequent gratitude directed to God as Israel understood and worshiped the Divine.

Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; You have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. (vss. 5-6, NIV)

The references in those lines refer to Israel’s settling in “The Promised Land.”

The word “portion” is used in the book of Joshua to designate every Israelite’s share in the land (see Joshua 19:9). Thus it represented the possibility of sustenance, life, future. For the Psalmist, God is the source of all these good things....To call God “my cup” suggests the same idea...the word “lot” recalls both the method and the results of apportioning the land in the book of Joshua (18:8,10; 19:51). (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IV, p. 736)

Thus we have in Psalm 16 an expression of good fortune which goes back to a lottery(!), but a lottery overseen by Israel’s God; as Israel understood the process, it was simply the way Divine Providence was executed.

The answer to my question – *Does gratitude need an object?* – The Psalms give eloquent answer: Yes, indeed! “Thanks be to God!” That unquestioned affirmation quite different from the statement I referred to earlier by the Jewish atheist Jonathan Haidt –

Even atheists have intimations of sacredness....We just don't infer that God caused those feelings."

In the wake of his experience of the risen Lord, the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians whom he had evangelized that there was available to them a peace beyond human understanding.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Here again, as with the Psalmist, a deep fundamental trust in God – a God who could be addressed, a God who listened to human requests and granted a peace beyond human understanding – requests brought in the context of thanksgiving.

So where are we?

A contemporary professor of positive psychology is convinced there is that in the human being that has a capacity to respond to "divinity," is aware of a sacred dimension whether or not God exists.

The biblical tradition from which we stem – the faith of Israel, the Gospel of Jesus as it has come to expression through his disciples and the early Jesus movement – is rooted in the faith understanding of God, creator, redeemer, provident provider and sustainer.

On Thursday we will celebrate our annual day of national thanksgiving. How will you express gratitude? Does gratitude need an object? Will it be a prayer of thanksgiving such as the Psalmist or St. Paul would offer? Or might it be simply a quiet awareness that puts you in the presence of the sacred, an awareness that you are blessed, a serenity that arises from a sense of wellbeing?

I purchased recently a book by the great scholar of Jesus research, biblical and other ancient texts, James M. Robinson, entitled *The Gospel of Jesus*. It was published in 2005 as Robinson's concise summary of the conclusion of all his research. Thus a great scholar condensing the great store of his learning for the benefit of the people who desire to understand the essence of the Good News that came to expression through Jesus' life and teaching. He states his conclusion already in the introduction:

In this Introduction I want to summarize Jesus' gospel, in as clear language as I can, so that no one can miss his point. The rest of the book will spell it all out in more detail; indeed, the Notes contain the scriptural references, so you can look up as much as you like. But I want to put up

front the outcome of all that, without any cluttering quotations or digressions, so that you do not lose the point. This book is intended less to provide information about Jesus than it is to let you listen to what he had to say back then, so that you can respond to what he may still have to say today.

The focus of Jesus' gospel was God taking the lead in people's lives, God remaking the world through people who listen to him. Jesus' favorite idiom for God in action was the "kingdom of God." A better translation might be the "reign of God" or "God reigning." This was not a common idiom of his day, to judge by the Jewish texts of his time that have survived, for the idiom is surprisingly rare. Apparently it was Jesus who first made it the central idiom for his message. Since the ideal of God reigning is the main idea Jesus talked about again and again, much of the book focuses on what he meant when he spoke that way.

It is an excellent work deserving its own treatment on another occasion, but at the conclusion of his work he addresses both the secularist – those who have “outgrown” the usual church – the standard kind of Christianity – and also the evangelical – those seriously committed to Christianity. It is what he says to the secularist that I find helpful given this discussion of gratitude.

Jesus did not point to himself to understand what he was doing or to explain himself to others. He pointed to God so we must listen to his God-talk if we really want to take him seriously, to understand him. (p. 220)

And then to the point I am attempting to make, Robinson states,

God-talk is not empty talk. It can be and usually is one way of talking about reality, an important way built into religious cultures. God-talk is like a foreign language – it is just a way of talking about things that is different from the way we are used to. (p. 220)

Robinson points out that we must learn to translate God-talk before we know whether or not it is saying anything of substance. He gives a couple examples of the necessity to understand the language of any particular discourse. The most well known debate from medieval times – How many angels can dance on the point of a needle? Sounds to us so ludicrous but Robinson points out it was a critical discussion about whether some thing can be real without taking up space. It was a profound philosophical debate in the medieval period by some of the best minds.

Robinson is simply trying to explain that one must enter the world of any given language – true of philosophical debates; true of God-talk and religious discourse.

These way-out illustrations, oversimplified as they may be, are intended to convince the most secular among you that God-talk is the language in which many substantive issues have been discussed down through the ages. Our rejection of them, indeed at times our ridicule, may be less evidence of our modern superiority than of our superficiality – our inability to understand what is brought to expression in any language other than our own. (p. 224)

I find Robinson most helpful. Trying to answer my question, *Does gratitude need an object?*, by doing empirical research with the language of science by which we lay bare the mysteries of the cosmos will hardly do. In fact, only a poem will do!

Thanksgiving is about deep human experience, about feelings, emotions in light of goodness received, love tasted, grace known. It can only be expressed in the language of the heart and our heart “knows” there is a Gracious Source, One in whom we live and move and have our being whose lure of love moves this cosmic drama toward wonders we have not yet dreamed of.

No rational dissertation will ever answer the deep question of the heart – only a poem will do!

Is it so surprising that the remarkable, gifted, flawed and most amazing human being, Steve Jobs, who died recently looked beyond his family and that circle of love and said,

“Oh, wow! Oh, Wow! Oh, Wow!”

Thanks be to God!

References:

Jonathan Haidt. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. Perseus Books Group, 2006.

James M. Robinson. *The Gospel of Jesus: A Historical Search for the Original Good News*. HarperOne, 2006.