

Gratitude: Assignment, Action or Attitude?

A Thanksgiving Message Considering Luke 15: 11-32

Good morning and Happy Thanksgiving. This is the week of expressing our gratitude, right? But, gratitude takes so many forms.

When I was a child, gratitude was an assignment. My Natchez born mother required, in Southern tradition, that each of her children acknowledge any gift – present, dinner, shared hosted event – with the response of a formal appreciative note. Gratitude as a required assignment. There is much we have to be thankful for.

Later, I learned that gratitude was an action. Once working in a pharmacy, I observed that amongst employees, every request or question was found attached by the spoken “Thank You.” Gratitude as an automatic reaction. There is more we have to be thankful for.

Sometimes, gratitude is a developed attitude. Instilled in us through catechism and cultivation, is the sense that we need to be open to express thankfulness when the circumstances seem to merit such. Gratitude as a reflective gesture. There is a most that we have to be thankful for.

Assignment, action, attitude. How does one go both further and farther? How do we say ‘thank you’ and mean it? How does our gratitude become active? How does gratitude manifest itself in meaningful ways?

Mark Twain was once asked whom HE thought was the single greatest storyteller of all time. With no hesitation Twain answered, ‘Jesus Christ.’ Twain was then asked ‘well what was Jesus’ single greatest story’? With no hesitation, Twain answered, ‘the Prodigal Son.’

In today's Order of Worship here is a copy of the story Twain appreciated. It is a story about Thanksgiving. It is a story about gratitude and what it entails.

It is a tale of the meaning of real appreciation from verse to verse and through out every single verse.

In this parable Jesus tells us that there are three things that are critically and crucially important to developing a presence of active gratitude.

First, Jesus tells us to conceive, consider, and yes, count our blessings. No, do not count possessions. Count blessings – those elements of our lives that we are simply, unexplainably favored with, and that show God's care and compassion for us. My sisters and brothers do this frequently.

This is where both the sons in today's parable went awry. This is why they both were prodigal, wasteful. Instead of blessings, they counted their entitlements and their rights.

"I want right now what's coming to me." "Have you ever thrown a party for me?" Entitlements. Give me what I am due. Now. No one can ever be grateful for something perceived as an entitlement or something rightfully due. One can only be grateful for the favor of a blessing.

Please ponder how the father in our tale continues to count both his sons as blessings, even though he had the clear right not to do so. Perhaps, he saw blessings in disguise.

God camouflages blessings and choses to illuminate them only over time. Blessings are often immediately, completely unobservable.

Fleming Rutledge writes that many of the greatest blessings are also the most intangible – lessons learned, insights gained, obstacles overcome, humility increased, help received, strength to persevere, and opportunities to serve others. There is much to be thankful for.

Second, Jesus tells of a God that prefers a loving relationship with us, over a legal, contractual transactions between us. Our Father is simply not interested in a system of “You do this for me, and then I do that for you.”

It’s the relationship with both of his sons that matter – the younger one – for whom the Father runs out, embraces, and kisses. The Father doesn’t even let the younger son finish that well rehearsed confession before the Father orders the celebration to begin. Then the older for whom the Father comes out and tries to reason with, begging that older brother to join in the celebration.

Jesus and the Father are one. The Creator so longs for a relationship with us, that in Jesus he came to us, down from heaven, arriving humbly and without dignity, holding and employing no power -- brandishing only the blessings of hope and healing and of forgiveness and love. Just like the Father in today’s story.

Being in relationship with God carries responsibilities. It means recognizing God’s sovereign power. It means sharing in God’s priorities, God’s interests, God’s joys, God’s needs, and yes, God’s sorrows. There is more to be thankful for.

Third, Jesus tells us to recognize the enormity of what God is offering. Jesus tells us to be aware of our privileges.

The world strives to convince us that a selfishness encouraging an attitude that, “no matter what I have gotten, I still do not have what I want.” I want. I want. I want. Along that path of those who have chosen such, we will find those who will never be satisfied with their life, their family or any friends, their job or schooling, or at worse, themselves.

At times both sons in our story were like this. One packs his bags and leaves for a different country. One stalks off sulking – refusing to join a celebration and then accuses the Father of shortchanging him. One son expects the Father to, at best, treat him like a slave. The other son is oblivious to the reality the inheritance he covets is already his. Do either of the sons know their Father?

Do we? Do we hear that, “you are with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours.” Do we hear that? Or are we so sometimes obsessed with the fate of a fatted calf that we ignore the offering of fated creation?

God is asking each of us to serve as His co-creators. Already, each of us is invited as an heir to the universe. We are called to share the kingdom, and the power and the glory. It is just God’s way. It is also God’s way that we share with one another. Good stewardship is not only about giving back to God: good stewardship is about sharing what God has shared with us in turn with others. There is the most to be thankful for.

Gratitude may seem sometimes an assignment or sometimes an action or sometimes an attitude. But when we pause to count our blessings, work on our relationships, and recognize our privileges; then gratitude becomes active, it is evident in our doings and our deeds.

Gratitude then becomes neither an assignment, nor an action and nor an attitude. Gratitude instead, becomes an avenue – into heaven's and one of its brightest and broadest and most beautiful paths. Happy Thanksgiving.