

Call to Worship

Gratitude comes from surrender – acknowledged dependence on God. Therefore, grateful people stop trying to put their personal stamp of approval on all the various items and events of life. Gratitude is a response to the whole show – to everything that comes, for everything that happens.

Bruce Van Blair
from “An Attitude of Gratitude”
in *A Year to Remember*

Invocation

Great Spirit,

How often we forget to be grateful, especially for the turbulence of life and the things we would rather not experience. How often we forget to be faithful, forget to put our trust in You. How often we forget to seek Your guidance, and more: how often we do not heed it. And then we remember. A moment of Light and we see the fabric of Your being, the way You envelop all that IS into Your tapestry. And that includes us. Every part of our being. The sun shines through the clouds of forgetfulness and *we remember*. And then we remember that we cannot be apart from You – that Your presence permeates every experience, every moment, every cell of our being. We remember to trust. And we remember to be grateful. For in that staggering awareness that You are here, and near, and we are never without Your guidance. Even in the storms, even in the tragedies, even in the thunderbolts from a calm sky. You are within all. Help us to know that so thoroughly that no fear, no shadow can disturb us from living within You. And let us lift our hearts and minds into Your Presence.

Amen.

Scripture

Luke 8: 22-25; Luke 11:9-10; Mathew 13:44

GRATEFUL FOR THE PRESENCE

People can be downright heroic. This is something I have come to know and appreciate. We face challenges in this life of ours, and darkness, and stumble forward towards Light and Truth, sometimes getting some hard bumps along the way. Still, we all show up and are here in this realm, and in some very real way we all share the common thread of a journey together.

In this particular week of focus on thanksgiving, we pause to acknowledge all that we are grateful for, all the ways that life and love have sustained us and made our lives a blessing. *There is so much goodness.* So much to gaze upon and open our hearts to in genuine thankfulness. Even so, much of life reveals that which we do not want and do not want to experience: that which creates feelings of pain. For ourselves or for others. Lost times and loss times. And not just “out there,” somewhere, but “in here,” inside, where the actual journey is taking place. Yet again and again, we are asked to even be grateful for the stormy times in our lives, as part of the faithful walk. The clarity of the message is expressed in this quote: “You thank God for the good things that come to you, but you don’t thank Him for the things that seem to you bad; that is where you go wrong.” Can this really be? Am I actually supposed to be grateful for the “whole show,” as the Call to Worship states? (A quote from Bruce Van Blair’s *A Year to Remember*, “An Attitude of Gratitude.”)

In the first Bible passage read today, Jesus admonishes the disciples for their fear in the storm. “Where is your trust?” he asks. Therein lies the key to navigating the storms of life. Trust. Surrender to God. Allowing that storms are a part of life, and that when we’re not trapped into our wrong ideas that there is any way that life is “supposed to be,” we can find the adventure within the experience, or at least a peaceful response – we can find the path and the way through the wind and the thunder.

Now, I do not want to sound Pollyanna about any of this. On the world level of awareness, much of life can get messy, ugly and downright treacherous. And I am not dealing here with the experiences of encounters with evil that is a part of this broken realm. That is another matter entirely. Yet even without going into that issue, we know that there are losses that we experience that stagger the mind and break the heart. Over and over, redemption, growth and awakening come in such packages. Thankfully, not too often, but damaging storms do occur and we do need to cultivate compassion and love in our responses to them and to each other.

However, I am particularly focusing on the way we navigate any trial of life, and the teachings about such that we are asked to follow. A quote from David Steindl-Rast, a Christian monk:

Once out of a hundred times we will be challenged to respond fully and gratefully to something which we cannot enjoy. This, too, is given reality; it, too, is gift. It all depends on whether or not I have learned to unwrap the gift-within-the-gift: opportunity. The gift-wrapping may be enjoyable or not; opportunity – the real gift – is always opportunity to grow.

I'll be truthful based on my experience: Upon hearing such wisdom, I am definitively not jumping up and down with gratitude for such "opportunity." Oh no. After I resist the challenge, after I moan and groan, mourn or weep, after my expression of anger at God – yes anger – after all of that I *may* be able to settle down and accept "what is." Truthfully it is a difficult process for me, not at all pretty, and a humbling one at that, when I honestly acknowledge that what my intellect accepts as true wisdom has not yet been embodied in my heart and my responses. Apparently I have work to do on this part of the path.

Yet we all know example after example of the way trials reveal themselves as blessings in the quiet *after* the storm, after the noise has quieted and after a period of acceptance. This is often a reminder I give myself when I cannot be grateful within the stormy times. Or I cultivate a sense of humor. Joseph Goldstein writes with a smile (or so I hear it): "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." I'm learning to surf. And while I may think it is way too soon for me to be on the North Shore where the waves break with so much vigor, each time I do not fall off my board is a victory. Even if I'm just barely holding on. And with each success, I grow more capable. *That* is cause for celebration. Learning trust and surrender. That is what it's all about, and not only for surfing the storms or "facing the darkness when it comes," but for all of life. Knowing what and whom we place our trust in.

So can we – can I – in this time of thanksgiving, acknowledge and open our hearts to *all* that life presents? This has been a very real part of my assignment right now in life. I was talking to a friend yesterday who reminded me that when our little family of four moved here to Wisconsin six years ago, the prospect looked sunny and optimistic. But I have faced plenty of challenges and losses, my faith has been challenged, and I have too-often reacted with fear and anxiety. It's been a long dark night and I am just starting to realize a new dawn contained within acceptance, and the gifts within the gift, which are plenty: A growing sense of my own self; a maturing; a finding of grit and sheer tenacity that I didn't know I possessed; a greater connection to the reality of a great Presence within; and support, love and friendship that can just bring me to my knees in gratitude.

So the answer to the question of opening my heart to all: yes. Especially as I view all that life offers from the spiritual perspective, I can honestly answer in this manner. I can accept it all. In very real part because there is nothing else to do BUT accept and place my trust in God. The alternative is debilitating, numbing (which consequently spills over into other parts of my life where I do not want to be numbed), and exhausting, as *the will* cannot fight fear. This spiritual awareness requires an awakening, so as to not get mired in the temporal, but to lift my heart and mind to the greater unfolding of my spiritual life, which is my real life, the life of the soul. And what I know and what I experience is that the more I trust in the loving God that Jesus has revealed, the more it is possible to accept all *that is*.

The path I follow – the path of following Jesus, learning from his actual life and way – continues to offer a road map: “*Ask and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.*” (Luke 11:9-10) And what I ask for is that my eyes stay focused on a truer reality and greater purpose, while responding with a wise engagement in life. I ask for greater awareness that while life may be complicated and mysterious, it is not dangerous. I ask to know truth, and live with greater and greater authenticity and freedom of being.

There is a short “story” that appears only in the Gospel of Matthew (13:44) that I think has much to teach on the subject of gratitude. It is so short – only two lines. The story is that of the man who finds a buried treasure in a field, buries it again, sells everything to buy the field, and then returns to it. To my mind, the story begs the question: *What next?* What happens now that this man has found the treasure? How does this shape his life from then on? And we all get to ask that question of ourselves. And what is this treasure he has found that is so great to be worthy of the sale of everything owned to obtain?

I share my “take” on it:

We are workers within a field of life. We till, we sow, we reap. We do what is necessary and sometimes what is not so necessary. We work the field, and sometimes other fields since we have secured no ownership. Then one day in one particular field, we encounter a great treasure. It’s beyond our wildest dreams; we are awestruck, dumbfounded with wonder upon the encounter, jubilant with celebration. *Of course* we would sell everything to own this field – give up everything that no longer has the substance or worth of this find. Now I am the owner of the field; the treasure is secure. What exactly is this treasure? I borrow the words of Brother David Steindl-Rast to describe it:

Only when we become ever so quiet inside do we sense in the smallest speck of reality a great Presence, both strange and familiar, waiting to meet us.

Ah yes, the Presence. Call it what you will: Holy Spirit, Christ within, the large Self – it is all the same, and once found it is the bedrock of our trust, our knowingness, and our dependable guide. Nothing can damage it or destroy it. A storm may disturb mightily, but we remember and return again and again to the assurance of the Presence within, securing for ourselves the knowledge that come what may, it is our indestructible inheritance. It is worth the price of all we have, all of this temporal life to remember and find, because it is the Truth of our being and is beyond our meager imaginings.

To put it another way, we sacrifice our false self to find our true self, our authentic self – the one that has been long buried and forgotten.

So now that we know this, have awakened to this treasure within, what becomes of life? *We continue to work the field.* There are weeds to hoe, seeds to sow, flowers to gaze upon, life to live, and yet now it is all done from a new perspective – the knowledge of this great treasure found has created a fork in the road of our lives. As I follow it I find this leads to an authentic life more and more *in* the world but not *of* the world. A year may yield a meager crop, a storm may ravage all, but what of it? It cannot disturb the treasure that I own, held

safely within the field. Theoretically I would never feel fear or anxiety about the storms of life again. Theoretically – because I am a forgetful being. My experience is that I remember, forget, and remember again. Over and over. Forgetting throws me into the pit – anxiety, fear, despair. Keeping with the metaphor: Living in the immediacy of daily response to life, I can get forgetful as days in the field may bring blisters to the hand, a drought, a hailstorm destroying the crop, or simply dust in the air choking the throat, making me forget my security. My job – my most important task – is to *remember the treasure*. And return to it again and again, uncovering it, spending time contemplating and cultivating it. It can sometimes be a struggle. How do I think about the treasure when dust is stuck in my throat? With difficulty. But I know that it is a temptation to allow the physical world to dominate, to succumb to the fear or confusion. And I have learned something very important: I am not the one having to remember anything *except that it exists*. IT – the Presence – will remind me every time I have the sanity to draw close to it, not the other way around. And I have also learned that life lived cultivating devotion, reverence, awe and wonder is a great compass to the buried treasure. And that *gratitude* fuels the journey.

The path of following Jesus reminds me that he did not forget his treasure, and so I listen to what he shows me. Contained within his life were pain and betrayal and challenges of a magnitude that stagger our imaginations, but ultimately his reliance was on God, on the treasure: the absolute knowledge and experience of his unity with God, and who he was.

The more time I spend with the Presence within, the more of my real self it reveals to me. From a recent class at *The New Church*: “Jesus gives me ME – my true self, my authentic self.”

Furthermore, Scripture tells that this Presence, this Spirit within, creates and IS the kingdom of heaven. Ever present and ever becoming. And connected to itself through each of us and all of life. Drawing us to one another for a greater purpose. I see our gathering as *The New Church* to be just that. Small in numbers (at the moment), but drawn together across borders and boundaries to connect *through the Presence* drawn unto itself, to make a difference – in our own lives as they are illuminated, and on out into the world. We are each like a little pencil in God’s hand, to borrow the phrase from Mother Teresa. Each assigned our part, each a part of the whole, to create the picture of a reality that we call the kingdom of heaven, as we learn to gaze upon our lives and the world with new eyes of vision and hope.

So where am I on my personal journey of gratitude for all that I encounter in the experience of my life? Well, I’ve learned quite a lot actually, as I’ve paused to consider this question. It turns out there are gifts within all of it. (Remind me please when I forget.) Today is a good day. I remember the Source because of the encounter with the Presence within. As Bruce has stated, “Good days are wonderful, and light is what we seek, but darkness is also a friend, if we keep walking with Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Bruce Van Blair, “Darkness Is Also a Friend,” from *A Year To Remember*.) Now that is something I am deeply grateful for.

In this moment let us go into that still interior space where we encounter the Presence, and through which we encounter one another.

Great Spirit,

We thank You with a great awe and wonder in our hearts for Your Presence within us, for lighting our way, for illuminating our identities, our mission and our purpose, for helping us remember. Thank You for drawing us together in Thy name – and we pray Your uniting prayer together: *Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.*