

“Gratitude”
Leviticus 7:11-15, Luke 17:11-19
October 13, 2019

There is a story of a young man who proposed marriage to his beloved, getting down on one knee as he held in his hand a beautiful engagement ring enclosed in an attractive blue velvet box. In response, his ears heard the words he yearned to hear: “Of course I will marry you! What took you so long to ask?” The day following their engagement, the young man received a note from his beloved which read “I know we will be happy together forever. How can I ever thank you enough for the beautiful blue velvet box? I will always cherish it!” Our young man was, understandably, rather confused.

This rather ludicrous story aptly illustrates the care and attention we humans give in this life to our body and our physical well-being. We spend about 99% of our resources and time on something that will return to the dust whence it came. And we neglect the gift inside of us, inside the box, given to us by God: our soul. And so many of us fail to thank God for such a priceless gift. We have missed the point.

True, there ARE many of us who are thankful, but sometimes we are thankful for the unimportant things. Like the Pharisees, who tithed on the cumin and mint and herbs and spices, but not on the big things in life, we sometimes miss what we really should be thankful for. And if we do occasionally remember what it is we should give thanks for, we do so only once or twice a week if we happen to make it to church that Sunday, but then go on our way the other days, blithely forgetting our blessings.

And so how many of us groan when the alarm clock rings in the morning? And how many of us, when we hear it go off, remember to be grateful for the fact that we are not deaf?

How many of us keep our eyes closed tightly against the morning light as long as we can, hoping to catch that extra moment of sleep, forgetting to be thankful that we are not living in the perpetual darkness of blindness?

There are many of us who sometimes maintain a martyred silence when we should speak, and spout forth when we should keep quiet. Yet how many of us appreciate the gift of speech, when there are many who are mute because they literally cannot articulate human sounds, or because nobody really listens to them when they do.

At our house, we have running in the background almost 24/7 the channel called Home and Garden TV. Many of us despair at the way our homes and our kitchens look - never do they begin to compare to the pictures in our magazines or on cable with matching dishes, plates, napkins, and silverware. And our menus are not always the most healthful and balanced. Yet do we always give thanks for the fact that we can eat at all, when so much of the world around us is going hungry?

Some of us really do not like our jobs. I know what that is like, having been a jack of many trades. I've been (among other things) a typesetter, a Community College teacher, a wine bottler, a farm laborer, a bookstore manager. Some of those jobs were fun; others, not so much. Yet how many of us are consistently grateful for the opportunity to work, for there are many who are unemployed - or unemployable.

We do find a lot to complain about - other family members, such as a spouse, a child, a parent, a sister or brother. Yet there are many people in this world who have no one. Should we not be appreciative of the human relationships, both past and present, which have graced our lives?

As a nation, we must be among the world's greatest complainers. We carry on about the cost of living, about foreign imports, about letters in the mail requesting our financial help for this or that cause. We complain about the President, about Congress, about the other Party - or about both parties. We complain about the state of health care, about the state of our roads, about the changing weather. Yet most of the world would be glad to have just a fraction of what we have - good clothing, automobiles, access to doctors and hospitals.

In fact, when we look at how others live, what we have is nothing short of a series of miracles: ample food, clean water, a roof over our heads. Yet we complain. I don't know who comes up with these figures, but statisticians have calculated that 125 years ago the average American had 72 "wants", 16 of which were considered "necessities." By the turn of the last century, they say the average American had 484 "wants" with 92 rated as "necessities." Rather than being appreciative for what we have, we just want more.

A devotional publication once put it this way: "It does not matter how full life may have filled your fortunate hands; if you have no gratitude, you reside in a spiritual "skid row." We need to learn how to be thankful, and show with our lips and with our lives that we have mastered the fine art of genuine gratitude."

As our Old Testament lesson this morning implies, the ancient Hebrews had an insight, a spiritual insight, that might help us not only to be thankful, but to show it. They realized centuries ago in ancient Israel that if you just said something, but didn't back it up with action, you might as well not say anything at all. So if we are to show that our hearts are grateful, we would naturally allow our gratitude to overflow into grateful acts and deeds.

How might we, here, today, do as the Israelites said we should? We come from a highly different culture, and the idea of preparing unleavened cakes with oil, or giving a priest yeast-filled cakes which could absorb blood sacrifices to be consumed the same day as they were offered, just doesn't speak to us. Instead, allow me to close by telling a short story, a true story.

It concerns the gift of music. But even if you are not a musician, I know you will be able to grasp what the story is trying to say.

An Englishman had added to his valuable collection a rare violin which Fritz Kreisler, the celebrated Austrian virtuoso of the early to mid-twentieth century, greatly

longed to possess. When the owner persisted in refusing to part with the instrument, Kreisler begged permission to play it just once.

Kreisler's wish was granted. With trembling hands, the artist tuned the instrument and then played. He played as only a genius can play. Forgetting himself, he poured his soul into the music, while the Englishman stood speechless, as one transfixed, until the playing ceased, whereupon Kreisler tenderly returned the instrument to its antique box, as a mother puts her baby to bed.

"Take the violin!" the Englishman burst out. "It is yours! I have no right to keep it! It ought to belong to the person who can play it as you did!"

Now to some, that might seem odd reasoning. After all, the collector had paid a pretty penny for that violin, and even though the collector was a wealthy man, the cost to him had been considerable. Yet he realized that an instrument should belong to the master who can draw the finest music from it.

Ought not your life, and mine, belong to the Master who can draw the noblest harmonies from us? True, the Master gave us life. It is ours to keep, if we so choose, for our three-score and ten. But gratitude itself would speak most eloquently if we were to yield back again the unspeakable gift of our own souls to the One who can transform us into something of unsurpassed beauty, richness, and meaningfulness.

Let us pray: