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A Thanksgiving Sermon

GARY SELBY

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise,” the Psalmist cries out. “Give thanks to him, and bless his holy name. For the Lord is good, and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

In his book, *How to Want What You Have*, psychologist Timothy Miller quotes the song that Louis Armstrong made famous:¹

I see trees of green, red roses too,
I see them bloom for me and you,
And I think to myself,
“What a wonderful world!”

I see skies of blue and clouds of white,
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night,
And I think to myself,
“What a wonderful world!”

The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people goin’ by.
I see friends shakin’ hands, sayin’ “How do you do?”
They’re really sayin’, “I love you.”

I hear babies cry, I watch them grow
They’ll learn much more than I’ll ever know,
And I think to myself,
“What a wonderful world!”

But then, Miller asks this disturbing question, “Is the world really wonderful?” Couldn’t someone just as easily sing:

I see hungry kids, and hopeless men,
And futile wars that no one can win,
And I think to myself,
What a terrible world!

And who would be right? Well, he says, it depends. It depends on your perspective. It depends on what you choose to see.

1. Timothy Miller, *How to Want What You Have: Discovering the Magic and Grandeur of Ordinary Existence* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 163-164.

I grew up singing the song, “Count your many blessings, name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.” And there came a point when that struck me as glib and patronizing, something that we might say as a way of glossing over the evil in the world, as a way of making other people’s very real experiences of pain less visible, less jarring to us. “Count your blessings—it’s not so bad.”

But sometimes it is bad. Sometimes giving thanks is the last thing we feel like doing.

Sometimes we feel like Aaron, in Leviticus chapter 10, Aaron, the brother of Moses, on what had to be the worst day of his life. His two sons, Nadab and Abihu, have just been suddenly, tragically killed. Yet, as High Priest, he’s supposed to keep the show going—and that includes presiding over a feast with what’s left of his family, carving up the edible portions of the goat that has been offered as a sacrifice. And Aaron just doesn’t have the heart to do it. So instead, he burns the whole goat up on the altar. When Moses confronts him for violating the regulation, Aaron, in a broken voice, says, “Such things as these have happened to me today—do you think I could possibly have pleased the Lord by eating that feast?”

Or maybe, like the Jews in exile who sang this lament, recorded in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps.
Our captors tormented us, demanding songs of joy:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
How can we sing the songs of Lord in a strange land?

Sometimes things happen to us, or happen to people that we love, or we find ourselves in circumstances that make us heartsick or afraid or distressed. And the last thing we want to hear is “Count your many blessings.”

And yet, for all of that, over and over again, scripture calls us to give thanks.

“Count off seven weeks from the beginning of the harvest,” Moses tells the people in Deuteronomy 16. “Gather together, give an offering, and rejoice before the Lord your God.”

“And then,” Moses goes on, “three months later, after the grain has been threshed and the grapes have all been pressed, have another celebration. Be joyful at the feast—you, your sons and daughters, all the servants, the orphans, the widows, the refugees among you.” He doesn’t say, “Those who’ve had a good year, whose lives have been untouched by loss or tragedy or disappointment, you who are doing well—you come and have a thanksgiving feast.” No. He says, “I want everybody to come.”

And in the New Testament:

Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5.19-20)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Phil 4.6)

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. (Col 2.15)

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess 5.16-18)

Over and over, when biblical writers talk about what it means to be God’s people, they repeat that invitation: “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving!” And they don’t let any of us off the hook. There don’t seem to be any exceptions. They don’t seem to imagine a situation about which they could say, “Oh, okay, you’re excused from thanksgiving.” Give thanks in all circumstances.

Are they asking us to ignore the reality of suffering? Are they asking us to deny the hurt that we, or the people we love, experience? If we're struggling with something, or afraid or disappointed or sad, are we supposed to pretend? Just put on a happy face?

I don't think so. But what I do believe they tell us is this: That in any situation we find ourselves, without denying the bad or the painful, without minimizing the evil we see around us, there's always that possibility of taking another look. There's always that option of being open to a glimpse of beauty or goodness or pleasure, like a stream in the desert, like a flower pushing its way up through a crack in the concrete. The possibility of seeing a blessing, and saying, "Thank you" to God.

You don't have to. But you can.

They remind us that thanksgiving is not just a spontaneous eruption; it's also a discipline, a practice that we have the possibility of engaging in regardless of how thankful we feel at the moment.

But they also remind us of something else: Maybe nothing else opens us up to the presence of God like thanksgiving.

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving," the Psalmist cries out, "for the Lord is good." From one reading of that verse, the people are brimming with the sense of God's goodness, they are convinced of God's faithfulness, and so they erupt in thanksgiving.

But maybe it also happens from the opposite direction. We give thanks, and it's in the very the act of giving thanks that we find ourselves—suddenly, maybe unexpectedly—in the presence of God. We give thanks, and the goodness and faithfulness of God suddenly become real to us. "In prayers and petitions," Paul says, "with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Maybe, after all, there is wisdom in that old song: "Count your many blessings, name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

You don't have to. But you can.

And maybe it's in that act of thanksgiving that we find ourselves suddenly entering the gates of the Father of mercies, the God of all consolation.

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