

That Aweful Feeling
Preached by
Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
United Church of Fayetteville
October 15, 2023
Gratitude Sunday

For Reflection:

"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." William Arthur Ward

Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Psalms 100:3-5*

Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Epistle Reading: *1 Peter 4:9-11*

⁹Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Meditation

That Aweful Feeling

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

"Feeling Aweful". Spellcheck wants to change the spelling, and I did warn everyone who prepares bulletins, slides etc. that it was not a typo (not that my typing ever includes errors but it always pays to be safe:-)

Our title hearkens back to the early meaning of the word and the one most frequently used in Scripture. Not to feel sick or scared—but to be filled with awe, with wonder at something outside ourselves, something that gives us a sense of our place in the universe and perspective on our role and power.

For a number of years, we have been celebrating "Gratitude Sunday" in the run-up to "Stewardship Dedication Sunday." This is based on our theology which reminds us that we make offerings and serve, not out of guilt or fear, but out of gratitude for all that we have received. If we are to honestly consider what we offer to God's service, we must first thoughtfully and prayerfully remember all that we have received for as Eckhart Tolle wrote "It is through gratitude for the present moment that the spiritual dimension of life opens up."

Just like awe, gratitude does not come naturally. It is learned—not inborn. I have never

had a parent tell me their child's first words were "Thank you." We learn it by watching people express thanks—the outward expression of the inward feeling of gratitude. Our children and grandchildren will learn it from us by seeing or not seeing our practices of appreciation, worship, thanksgiving and offering.

I am reminded of an occasion many years ago now. I was having dinner with friends, who were active in the church, apparently quite financially comfortable and, in so far as I know, generous. They had just updated their wills to be sure their only child was taken care of should anything happen to both of them. Then they mentioned that they had made no charitable bequests or memorial gifts, because they wanted their child to "have the joy" of giving the money to things they were passionate about. In the course of this, they also stated that they did not discuss with their child any of their current charitable efforts for the same reason. Please note several things: these people were good friends for whom I had and still have the highest regard; I did not initiate this conversation or make what I consider to be intrusive inquiries; it is never my place to comment on someone's financial planning or parenting. I am not doing that now.

What I am doing is offering that experience in the form of theological illustration: Gratitude is not an in-born trait; nor is the inclination to sharing. If we hide our witness to God's giving, our gratitude, our values, our sharing of ourselves and our treasure, and the joy it brings us, especially, but not solely to our children and grandchildren, how will they learn the joys of those things and the fulfillment that comes from sharing? How will our community know that our congregation's giving and sharing is based in gratitude and not fearing of an angry God whom we do not preach here, or simple condescension to those who do not have what we have?

Nor is gratitude a feeling that can be evoked on command. One can't just say, "Be grateful" and people are grateful. Ask any parent who has ever uttered the words, "You should be grateful that you..." if the instruction ever evoked more than eye-rolling.

A preacher can't just say, "Be grateful" and face a people overwhelmed with gratitude. In my professional circles, it is often commented that ours is an exceedingly difficult country and era in which to preach gratitude—a country where we pride ourselves on being self-made; when we historically have been a nation whose legacy is that people can make anything of themselves here; where we have really lost a sense of on whose shoulders we stand; of whose choices, sacrifices and resources made possible what we do.

If we have forgotten all that we have received because of the access we have to resources provided by our families, our congregation, our cities and our nation have made available to us, G. K. Chesterton would remind us that "When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude."

No. Gratitude isn't a natural thing and it isn't a thinking thing. It is an attitude that comes through spiritual practice and attention to our world. Nor is it an easy thing. It takes discipline and practice. Gratitude is a hard attitude to achieve and maintain—it takes practice and more practice.

Whether it is in a spot interview on the street, a personal conversation, casual chat or the traditional prayer at the Thanksgiving tables around which we will soon gather, after the "big three" of family, friends and health, people usually run out of steam. I know there are some of you now naming a few other things to yourselves which is excellent. If this message had homework—they all do of course—but assigned homework, I'd challenge folks to write the longest list they can for things to be thankful for—beginning with "the sun came up and I with it." We could have an informal contest.

Gratitude isn't an easy spiritual practice; it is one that bears fruit for rich joyful lives. Acknowledging that we have received much does not denigrate our own achievements and need

not lessen our sense of accomplishment about how we have responsibly used what we have received. Rather, gratitude can help us keep our lives in perspective; it can serve to reassure us that we are not alone; and that all does not depend on us.

There is an ancient proverb (not from our scriptures) which says, "When you are grateful, fear disappears and abundance appears." Gratitude can serve the very practical purpose of lowering our stress levels and reducing our anxieties.

Then it may be for us as Henri Nouwen wrote: "Perhaps nothing helps us make the movement from our little selves to a larger world than remembering God in gratitude. Such a perspective puts God in view in all of life, not just in the moments we set aside for worship or spiritual disciplines. Not just in the moments when life seems easy. "

As we go forth this week, with thanks on our lips and in our minds, may our practice of gratitude be strengthened and enhanced for our sakes and the sake of the world. Realizing that we are rich in things which have cost us no money, as we anticipate making our financial commitments to Christ's service in this place, commitment, "Let us remember that, as much has been given us, much will be expected from us, and that true homage comes from the heart as well as from the lips, and shows itself in deeds." Teddy Roosevelt's words are as true today as they were when he first uttered them.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: Gift us with your Spirit, in these moments, as we seek your guidance and purpose for our lives and ministry and service in the world.

We remember those who are ill, who are caregivers and all who need our care...

We especially remember those with whom we are in strained relationship. Grant us your vision of their gifts and goodness, as well as our own. Give us your wisdom to see the way that we should go for healing of hearts, souls and minds.

Most holy God: We have no words to express our horror at the events in Israel and the Gaza Strip. We pray for all those families who have lost loved ones and homes; for those who are held hostage and all the families who do not know the fate of their loved ones; for armed combatants, that they may serve with honor and find reason to lay down their weapons under wise leadership; for first responders struggling to provide care; for humanitarian workers in every role. Nor do we forget the ongoing carnage in Ukraine.

Our own grief is compounded by our government's current uncertainty in process and effectiveness that limit our nation's ability to respond. We pray for our leaders and those around the world that they might make working together for peace and justice a first priority.

We cry peace, peace in a world where there is no peace. Now we stop our words that we might feel your presence, hear your Word and be filled with compassion and hope so that we might respond in faithful ways to the world that needs us. We are listening, Lord...

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The Lord's Prayer

**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.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.