

Choosing Gratitude

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 20, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Psalm 100](#)

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The advertised title to today's sermon¹ – well, I picked it over a month ago, and as I did my research this week, I realized I wanted a new name for it: Choosing Gratitude. You can blame Marcus Borg and Brother David Steindl-Rast. And maybe Psalm 100.

The third stanza of Psalm 100 is what hooked me:
“Enter the divine gates with thanksgiving
and the divine courts with praise.
Give thanks to God, bless God's name.”

I read this stanza and I wondered, “Do we give thanks out of a sense of duty? Do we give thanks to God out of a sense of obligation? Is it a requirement? Or is it a choice?” I've long thought that thanksgiving was a choice, so I went looking for what theological heavy hitters thought.

And then I read how both Borg and Steindl-Rast each make a case for understanding *thanksgiving* and *gratitude* as different terms. For Steindl-Rast, gratitude is a feeling we can cultivate within, and thanksgiving is the externalizing of that feeling. Borg says that sometimes gratitude and thanksgiving are the same, but not always.

“One of the best-known prayers of thanksgiving,” Borg wrote, “is in a parable of Jesus (Luke 18.9-14). A devoutly religious person prays, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people.’ His thanksgiving was about his difference from others.

“Less well-known is the table grace prayed by Jimmy Stewart's character in the 1965 movie *Shenandoah*. For almost fifty years, it has remained with me (you can look it up on the Internet):

“Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvest it. We cook the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat. Amen.

“A thanksgiving prayer? I suppose so. But it's mostly about self-reliance and deservedness.

“Gratitude is very different. It is both a feeling and an awareness. As a feeling, it is often accompanied by a sensation that is at least metaphorically physical: a virtual breaking open of the ribcage, an opening of the heart, a flooding of the self with sheer gratefulness.

¹ This sermon was advertised to be “Choosing Thanks.”

“As an awareness that persists beyond the feeling, it is the realization that life, all of life, our lives, are a gift. Indeed, the words ‘gratitude’ and ‘grace’ have the same root. None of us created ourselves. None of us is self-made.”²

I had a professor who said that if you ever meet someone who claims he’s a self-made man, ask to see his bellybutton. It was the 1980s, so I’m not sure if the use of the male pronouns was intentional or habit. Today, I’d probably still use male pronouns because I think the vast majority of people who have the misconception that they’re self-made are men. Women tend to understand that we’re connected to each other, that none of us is self-made. Our bellybuttons prove it.

Borg asks, “If our lives have turned out well, how much of that is the product of our own individual achievement? And how much is the product of the genes with which we were born that gave us a level of physical vitality, intelligence, health and longevity? How much is the product of the family we were born into, with its values and economic level? How much is the product of the country and time in which we were born?”³

Since he wrote those questions, more and more statistical evidence points to our ZIP Codes being more important than our genetic codes in determining “overall health outcomes and life expectancy. Up to 60% of your health is determined solely by your zip code. This is largely due to the nature of the communities people reside in, such as whether it has wealth, whether or not there is strong community investment, and whether hospitals and health centers are present, among others. Your social and built environment determines your individual health and community health, above personal behavior and clinical care”⁴

Borg goes on: “The notion of ‘self-made persons’ who deserve all the success and wealth they’ve received is simply wrong. Indeed, ‘deservedness’ is the opposite of gratitude, even if it occasionally produces prayers of thanksgiving.

“As both a feeling and an awareness, gratitude is a virtue with ethical consequences. When we feel most grateful, it is impossible to be cruel or callous, brutal or indifferent. And gratitude as the awareness that life is a gift precludes the hard-heartedness that often accompanies the ideology of ‘the self-made person.’ The latter often leads to, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people.’”⁵

The place that Borg doesn’t get to, at least not in the essay I was quoting, is that we can choose to be this way. We can choose to be grateful. We can choose gratitude. In fact,

² Marcus Borg, “Gratitude: One of the Most Important Virtues,” *Day 1*, https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037bd/marcus_borg_gratitude_one_of_the_most_important_virtues (posted 29 November 2013; accessed 19 November 2022).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Emily Orminski, “Your Zip Code Is More Important Than Your Genetic Code,” National Community Reinvestment Coalition, <https://ncrc.org/your-zip-code-is-more-important-than-your-genetic-code/> (posted 30 June 2021; accessed 19 November 2022).

⁵ Marcus Borg, *op. cit.*

for Brother David (as Steindl-Rast is typically called), gratitude is “a full-blooded, reality-based practice and choice.”⁶

“... [N]ot for everything that’s given to you can you really be grateful,” Brother David points out. “You can’t be grateful for war in a given situation, or violence, or sickness, things like that. So the key, when people ask, ‘Can you be grateful for everything?’ – no, not for everything, but in every moment.”⁷

“It is a chosen response,” he says. “It’s a real response to every moment.”⁸

Brother David says that there is a methodology to practicing gratitude. Perhaps we can call it attending, “the act of listening and really looking and beholding.” He says the methodology is “very simple.”

“Stop, look, go. Most of us — caught up in schedules and deadlines and rushing around, and so the first thing is that we have to stop, because otherwise we are not really coming into this present moment at all, and we can’t even appreciate the opportunity that is given to us, because we rush by, and it rushes by. So stopping is the first thing.

“... And then you look: What is, now, the opportunity of this given moment, only this moment, and the unique opportunity this moment gives? And that is where this beholding comes in.

“And if we really see what the opportunity is, we must, of course, not stop there, but we must do something with it: Go. Avail yourself of that opportunity. And if you do that, if you try practicing that at this moment, tonight, we will already be happier people, because it has an immediate feedback of joy.”⁹

In other words, gratitude is a chosen response not to what happens, but to the opportunity one can discern (by stopping, looking, and going) in that moment – and especially in the midst of moments for which we are not reflexively grateful. I think this is why Psalm 100 can encourage us to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Why Psalm 100 can encourage us to approach God with gratitude, to make the choice of gratitude. Why Psalm 118 can remind us, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” And why Maya Angelou could proclaim, “This is a wonderful day. I’ve never seen this one before.”¹⁰

Stop. Look. Go.

Imagine being able to hit your thumb with a hammer and (after screaming for a bit and racing to get some ice) being able to stop, look, and go into gratitude. Perhaps you would be grateful that it doesn’t happen all that often. Perhaps you would be grateful that you have a nervous system that lets you know you’ve injured yourself.

⁶ Krista Tippet in a podcast of an interview she did with Brother David Steindl-Rast for the program *On Being*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/david-steindl-rast-how-to-be-grateful-in-every-moment/> (originally aired on 21 January 2016; posted on 9 April 2020; accessed 19 November 2022).

⁷ From the above interview.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Quoted lots of places, including <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/846525-this-is-a-wonderful-day-i-have-never-seen-this>.

Stop. Look. Go. A practice that helps us give thanks to God.
Amen.