

Looking with Gratitude

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on January 29, 2023, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Acts 4:32-35

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I think my favorite scene from *It's a Wonderful Life* is the one at the very end of the film. It begins when George finds that he has his life back, after being shown what life would have been like in Bedford Falls if he had never been born. George runs through the town yelling “Merry Christmas” to all the familiar places and people—even grumpy old Mr. Potter—and rushes home to gather his family into his arms. His love for them is palpable, and his gratitude for his restored life is infectious. And then the people come with their gifts, piling money on the table until it overflows. The scene never fails to bring tears to my eyes.

That pile of money at the end of the movie echoes our text from Acts 4 today, doesn't it? As Riki read, the people of the early church “did not claim private ownership of any possessions, but held everything in common.” Those who had property sold it and brought the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed among the whole community so that all would benefit.

I think the similarities between these two stories run deeper than just the image of community resources gathered together. One of the similarities is that both of these stories are countercultural, going against the messages that are being given by society — both the Roman empire, which the early church inhabited, and the capitalist society of midcentury America, primarily represented in Bedford Falls by the character of the evil Mr. Potter. And both societies, even though they are 2000 years apart, are based on the Roman system of reciprocity.

The society of the Roman Empire was based on a system of reciprocity or obligatory gratitude. In the empire, all good things floated down as gifts from the emperor. Money, land, power, prestige, and all other resources came as gifts from the emperor. In return, the empire's subjects were expected to show “gratitude” by paying taxes and tributes and offering loyalty to the empire. As these gifts trickled down, each layer of society would skim off their share, leaving less and less for the people below. By the time the gifts ended up at the bottom, the poorest at the very bottom of the hierarchy were left with very little.

In a way, Mr. Potter represents this system of empire. Like an emperor in his own little empire, he is a very wealthy man. With any gift he gives or favor he does, he expects something in return—a concession of some sort, a payment, or loyalty to him and his schemes. Even though the Roman Empire fell centuries ago, and there have been many experiments with different forms of government in the intervening years, this system of reciprocity continues to be the one that is most durable.

The Latin term for the system of reciprocity is a familiar one: *quid pro quo*. Literally, it translates as “what for what” or “something for something.” In the original Latin, it meant a substitution—substituting one thing for another similar thing—but since the 16th century, English speakers have used it the way we do now, meaning a reciprocal arrangement of favors or

obligations. In such a system, if someone gives a gift or does a favor, there is an expectation that one must return that gift or favor in order to be considered grateful. Quid pro quo is gratitude based in duty or obligation, not actual thankfulness.

In her book about gratitude, appropriately titled *Grateful*, religious scholar Diana Butler Bass calls this kind of reciprocity system a type of “cheap gratitude”—a gratitude that is more about personal comfort and success than communal well-being. “Duty-based gratitude is emotionally empty,” says Butler Bass, “and [it] causes resentment. It is easy to suspect that benefits are given to exert control by, or forge loyalty to, an unscrupulous benefactor. Obligatory gratitude rarely has a heart. Rather, it breeds contempt and fosters injustice. In a real way, duty and debt cheapen gratitude to a social or political indenture.”¹

Duty-based gratitude is alive and well in our political system, even though we strive for a representative democracy and not a hierarchical empire. Our politicians receive large donations from both wealthy individuals and corporations, who, of course hope that if elected, the politician will return the favor by enacting legislation in their favor. He may not have been the first to suggest the idea, but the late comedian Robin Williams once suggested that politicians should wear suits like a NASCAR driver, emblazoned with the names of the corporations that gave them the most money. The idea was so appealing to Republican John Cox, that in 2016 he actually tried to get an initiative on the California ballot that would have required this of state legislators.

Another type of cheap gratitude that Diana Butler Bass explores in her book is something she calls “prosperity gratitude.” “Our understanding of thanks is polluted by our toxic dissatisfactions,” Butler Bass says, “as we praise God for material possessions instead of the good gifts of nature and neighbor. [...] If we just say “Thank you, thank you, thank you” long enough and with the greatest sincerity, we will be healthy and wealthy. This form of gratitude acts as a magical mantra, the key to unlocking personal spiritual peace and well-being. If we feel just good enough, with enough money and success, life will be a blessing. Or maybe not. Maybe we want just a bit more. A bit more blessing. What could be wrong with that?”²

For Butler Bass, the contrast to cheap gratitude is “deep gratitude.” In defining this type of gratitude, she turns to writing of pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was jailed and executed for resisting the Nazis. While in prison, Bonhoeffer “experienced gratitude, a sense of humility and dependence on the gifts of others, more profoundly than ever before.”³ Here is what he wrote:

In normal life, one is not at all aware that we always receive infinitely more than we give, and that gratitude is what enriches life. One easily overestimates the importance of one’s own acts and deeds, compared with what we become only through other people.⁴

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), xxi.

² *Ibid.*, xxii.

³ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works—Reader’s Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 129; quoted in Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), xx.

Cheap gratitude—gratitude based on *quid pro quo* or duty or obligation, or expressed as thanks for personal achievement or wealth or success—obscures what is “true and important about the nature of things: that life is an abundance of shared gifts. We do not really achieve. We receive. We give to each other. [...] Gifts bring forth gratitude, and we express our appreciation by passing gifts on to others. When we share gifts, we become benefactors toward the well-being of all.”⁵

There is a Latin term that is the opposite of *quid pro quo*. And that is the term *pro bono*. A person who is doing work *pro bono* is offering good or services without expecting any payment. But the term *pro bono* doesn’t mean “for free.” The direct translation is, “for good.” In other words, rather than an expectation of obligation or duty, someone who is giving *pro bono* is giving for the sake of the greater good.

The early church — and George Bailey’s version of Bedford Falls, I would suggest— was trying to create a *pro bono* system in the middle of the *quid pro quo* empire, an act that was dangerously countercultural. The apostles and the early believers were upending the Roman hierarchical system of reciprocity by pooling all of their resources and making sure that everyone in the community had enough to meet their needs; everyone had enough, and no one had too much. The citizens of Bedford Falls, in their generous gifts to George Bailey, were also upending the reciprocity system of Mr. Potter. They gave to George not because they had to, or out of some sort of obligation, but out of love and gratitude for all the ways that George Bailey had touched each of their lives and had made Bedford Falls a better place to live and work.

It may be that the community of the early church, as it is depicted in the book of Acts, is no more factual than the idyllic town of 1940s Bedford Falls depicted in the film. This passage from the Acts certainly paints a rosy picture of those times, and biblical scholarship suggests that the book was probably written some decades after the events, by a person who was looking back in time with nostalgia, and perhaps rose-colored glasses, just as we might look back at post-war America. But just because it may not be factual, does it mean that this passage isn’t important or worthy of our study and attention. In fact, this sharing of resources is mentioned at least three times in the first few chapters of the book of Acts, an indication that this was a very important value held by the early Christians. It’s easy to dismiss this story as a rosy fantasy, something not achievable. But the values that this passage expresses are built into our DNA as Christians. Working for, researching, envisioning and practicing alternatives to our present economic situation has always been part of the Christian vision for community.

Those early Christians were practicing *pro bono* gratitude, rather than cheap *quid pro quo* gratitude. They were striving to create a communal life, one that nurtured the whole self—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—in a community where everyone had what they needed and no one was left behind.

Perhaps, with faith, if we can activate that early Christian DNA and, like they did, align our relationship with money to practices of deep gratitude, we can begin to cultivate a *pro bono* community here in our time and place—a community of deep resilience, profound compassion

⁵ Butler Bass, xxv.

for others, intimate awareness of the sacred, and thoughtful commitment to justice—all characterized by our palpable love and infectious gratitude. May it be so. Amen.