

**UU SERMON – November 25, 2012:
An Attitude Of Gratitude - Unlocking The Fullness Of Life**

GRATITUDE. What more can we say about it? At this time of year, during the Thanksgiving holiday, we focus a lot on gratitude and giving thanks. In our songs, readings, prayers, and thoughts, we remember the positive things in our lives, and in the world, like family, health, nature and love. We appreciate all those wonderful things that we often take for granted the rest of the year.....All very important, so are we perhaps a bit overstuffed with the subject of gratitude, like our stomachs after the turkey dinner? Is there REALLY more to be said?

Well, YES, I believe there is... What about the pain, grief, disappointments, and fears in our lives, and the pain and suffering in the world? All the stuff that's NOT working in our lives, all that is terrible in the world? Does gratitude fit with any of that?

In my own life, I struggle quite a lot with feeling gratitude around experiences that happened in the past, with some of what is going on in the present, and with some of what I imagine could be in the future. In the past, I'm still grieving the loss of my Dad, and still regretting what I did and didn't do while they were alive.In terms of the present, there's a lot of upheaval in my life, such as with work and money.... And the future? Well, I'm 61 now, anxious about my aging body, sad that maybe I don't have so much time left anymore to fulfill my dreams. I'm fearful of getting old and dying.

GRATITUDE?? FOR ANY OF THAT? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

How about you? What are some things – past, present, or future - that you might find challenging to feel grateful about? Take a moment to silently reflect on them.

So what is gratitude anyway?....Gratitude is an attitude... an attitude of recognition, and appreciation, for all the things that come our way. That includes the good stuff, of course, but also that which we did not want, or even ask for or work toward....Gratitude is a feeling, an emotional response, but it is also a choice we make. In part, it's a choice to be generous, to be giving, and to give thanks for what we see as beneficial. But even more so it is about our willingness to RECEIVE, to receive the gift, in every situation, with every person, trusting that life itself – kind or harsh, happy or sad – is good, if only we receive it as a gift....Gratitude is about keeping our hearts open, to embrace each situation and moment, to embrace pain and grief and fear – or whatever the emotion.

Sometimes gratitude means seeing the situation in perspective, that it could be worse. I could be homeless and/or in poor health. Sure....But in many situations, for gratitude to be healing and transformative, to be more than a bandaid, it MUST start from a dark,

murky place, a place of unknowing, even terror, such as the fear of suffering from an incurable disease, of being trapped in one's body, which is how my Dad described his experience. And the terror imagining myself as no more, only dust and bones, no life after death, no soul, nothing. Gratitude for this kind of inner space requires, above all, a willingness to be there fully, to live in it, with a fearlessness amidst the fear and confusion. This creates a larger space in which something is released and peace can come in. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote "The point is... to LIVE EVERYTHING. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday...in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

I'm working on this, and if you check back with me in about 10 years, I'll probably still be at it.

Well, that's sort of a broad overview of the gratitude path in meeting our challenges, but what does one actually do? What are some of the tools and strategies?

Again, Rilke. He said, "Even what tastes most bitter can be transformed ...Can it not serve as a wine press that releases an unexpected sweetness? Is there some way in which it allows you to reclaim or release a part of yourself that you'd forgotten?" He suggests three qualities through which to explore our own bitter crushing experiences – the qualities of courage, compassion, and a deeper awareness of what matters. All three come up when I reflect on my grief around the death of my Dad. The courage to live more from my heart, rather than just my head, and to face the cruelty of illness that happens in life. His death released tremendous compassion for his suffering over the years, for his struggle to be a loving father, and for my struggle to be a loving son. And from his death came the deeper awareness of forgiveness and that in the end, all there is, all that matters, all that EVER matters, is love... When I view his death through these qualities, I feel a profound gratitude.

There are many other qualities to help us find the gratitude, the gift, in even the most difficult of situations. We have that choice. I always think about Victor Frankl, who was a prisoner in the Auschwitz Death Camp. He wrote that, in the midst of the most horrible circumstances any human could be in, he realized that he was still free to be with his wife in his mind and experience the deepest love with her. In that way, he lived in gratitude, and with a purpose. Miraculously, he survived to tell the story.

In our own, probably far less dramatic situations, what qualities or creative responses are we being called upon to develop? In my job and financial struggles, what comes to mind are patience, humility, and confidence. And a creative response might be to develop my ministry during those wee hours at work, when I am free to study and write.

Some closing thoughts now about the attitude of gratitude:

It asks us for trust and faith, to be able to endure and overcome the obstacles to “live everything”, in Rilke’s words, and to live a happy and healthy life with meaning and purpose....It asks us for devotion which fuels the commitment, perseverance, patience, and energy to be in alignment with ourselves and the world...It asks us for prayer - whether directed to a divine being, within our self, or into the universe – that we humbly open ourselves to the love, wisdom, and fearlessness within, by which we can fully experience the blessings around us.

It asks us to consider letting go of those things in life we may be most attached to, but which might be holding us back from living our lives in alignment and receiving the gifts we truly need. David Richo says, “As we practice the unconditional yes we notice that we no longer ask: 'Why?' or 'Why me?' Now we simply say: 'Yes, now what?'”

I’d like to end with a short poem that, for me, speak to the heart of gratitude, what it all boils down to.

From Hafiz, the 14th century Persian Sufi mystic:

Even After All this time
The sun never says to the earth,
'You owe Me.'
Look What happens With a love like that.
It lights... the Whole Sky.

THANK YOU