

GRATEFUL BY COMPARISON

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, November 23, 2008
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Reading

Luke 18: 10-14

Lucas Hergert

Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying in this way: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give away a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, [said Jesus] this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, while all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Modern Reading

The Newer Vainglory

Alice Meynell

Two men went up to pray; and one gave thanks,
Not with himself – aloud,
With proclamation, calling on the ranks
Of an attentive crowd.

“Thank God, I clap not my own humble breast,
But other ruffian’s backs,
Imputing crime – such is my tolerant haste –
To any man that lacks.

“For I am tolerant, generous, keep no rules,
And this age honors me.
Thank God, I am not as these rigid fools,
Even as this Pharisee.”

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This weekend marks 36 years since my wife Gwen and I became engaged. She was then a student at Yale Divinity School; I was at Harvard. It was the weekend of “The Game.” We agreed that if Harvard beat Yale, she would marry me; but that if Yale beat Harvard, I would marry her!

David Brooks says that there are going to be so many Harvard-Yale types in our new President’s cabinet that next year during “The Game,” national security will be in danger! But last Sunday afternoon I showed my dear wife, as I have regularly for 36 years now, that it is quite possible for a fellow with a fancy education to make a real fool of himself.

We’d had a wonderful morning here in Needham! The church was full. Terasa Cooley preached well. We welcomed eleven new members. Two more people later signed the Membership Book. The parlor was packed for a program Terasa led on our future as a parish. So by the time she and Gwen and I arrived in Winchester, for the installation of our former intern, Sarah Gibb, and her husband, John Millspaugh, as co-ministers of the Unitarian congregation there, my pesky little ego was feelin’ *good*. There were lots of colleague ministers there, vesting, and I went around, greeting everyone, feelin’ *good*.

We marched down the aisle. I sat behind the pulpit, as the preacher for the occasion. Colleagues prayed. The choir sang. I got up to preach. And around the fourth paragraph of my sermon, my cell phone rang -- in my pocket, under my robe. I did a little dance, while it kept ringing. Some may have thought I had an uncomfortable itch. I hit the wrong button: *Talk*. “Hello, John?” I kept on preaching. Finally I found *End*, held it down, pretended that maybe no one had noticed, and then finished up my message.

Terasa got up a bit later to give her “charge to the congregation.” “Forgive me, John,” she began. “but when your cell phone rang during the sermon, if you’d been at all *smooth*, you’d have answered, then said, “Hello? Yes. . . OK, God, I’ll be sure to tell them that!”

“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” Proverbs 16:18 [KJV]
This weekend is also the 40th anniversary of “The Game” in which undefeated Yale was vanquished by Harvard, 29 to 29, in scoring 16 points in the final 42 seconds. “Forget it!” God told me this week. Instead, I was told to recall a late, great preacher, G. Peter Fleck.

Peter never went to seminary. Not to Harvard, or Yale, or anywhere else. In 1940 he escaped from his native Holland just ahead of the Nazis, with his young wife, Ruth, whose heritage was Jewish. They came to America and raised a family in the Unitarian Church of Plainfield, NJ. Mort Gesner, who had served here in Needham, was their minister. Peter became President of the Rothschild Bank. He was also such a deep thinker and fine lay preacher that his sermons were often more profound and eloquent than those of ministers with a fancy education. When he and Ruth retired to Cape Cod, he became a kind of volunteer, un-ordained associate minister in Brewster – until the people there *insisted* on ordaining him.

We smug, privileged liberals are always tempted to pray, “I give thee thanks, Lord, that we are not as hide-bound as other believers.” But Peter once preached a sermon at this season called “On Giving Thanks.” In it, he retold the classic story of the Pilgrims, who, 388 years ago this weekend, first found landfall on Cape Cod; all 109 of them. The 41 male adults had all signed the “Mayflower Compact”; a layman, William Brewster, had preached for them. Their pastor, John Robinson, who was too ill to sail had famously said, “If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.” So the Pilgrims were very open to new understandings. About gratitude. As unconditional.

That first winter was hard. The next summer was one of drought. By this season the next year, more than half of the Pilgrims had died. They had harvested little. Yet nonetheless that November they declared a day of Thanksgiving. It has become the most inclusive of American holidays. And yet too often we think it is about being thankful for the harvest, or for the good things of the year past. Or being better off than someone else who has it worse than you.

As Peter Fleck rather prophetically preached, “Suppose [someone] in the stock market goes to a Thanksgiving service. The Dow Jones [has crashed.] Will [that person] still be thankful?” Real gratitude, he said, is not “thankfulness by compassion” – as the readings we heard this morning also make quite clear. Then he spoke from his own generation’s experience: “In the [Nazi] death camps . . . this principle was widely applied: people will suffer any-thing as long as there are others who suffer more, as long as they can tell themselves that they do not represent the lowest level of being, [and] can feel superior to somebody else, as long as – in spite of their misery – they can be thankful that they are not one of those even more miserable ones.”

This turns the telescope we heard about in Irene’s story around. It puts the focus on us, the grateful, but all too often grateful only by comparison. Even much of what we said, heard, and sang in the first part of our service today has had this tone, I’m afraid:

“We thank thee Lord, that, by comparison, our barns are heaped; that our land is, relatively, free; that we’re well off, and able to share and give.” But there is a spiritual danger in this. It’s not only a danger of smugness, and pride. As Peter says, “People will suffer anything as long as there are others who suffer more.” That’s also a real danger.

No, authentic gratitude is *not* by comparison. It is more unconditional. As Gwen reminds me, in her tradition, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, before the eucharist the priest says, “Let us give thanks unto our God,” and the laity respond, “It is meet and right so to do.” Then she continues, “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should always and everywhere, give thanks unto thee, O . . . God. . .”

No wonder she so often asks me, at we sit down to dinner together, “So . . . are we grateful tonight?” And some nights, frankly, all I can do is mumble, grumble, and say, “Compared to what?” The stock market is down. All things here at First Parish may or may not be going all that smoothly. I’ve spent time with someone whose suffering an illness or experience of abuse or an injustice seems like an outrage. Or perhaps I myself have just made a fool out of myself in some minor way again. Hard to be grateful!

Yet slowly I am beginning to catch on. Peter was right. Thankfulness by comparison lacks a certain spiritual maturity. **Unconditional gratitude**, even in the hard times, always and everywhere, is what is really needed. A gratitude that has nothing to do with being better off, or better, than anyone else; nor with this day being easier or less difficult than any previous time. Rather an abiding gratitude, even in the hard times, for what I have sometimes called “the unmerited beauty of being itself.”

Peter quoted Shakespeare, who puts in the mouth of King Henry VI, this prayer, “O Lord, that lends me life,/ Lend a heart replete with thankfulness.” He compared its spirit to the wisdom of the Jewish prayer that says, “Blessed art Thou, O God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us in life and has preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season.” Through the spiritual discipline known as “Living by Heart,” in which we return to poems and wisdom that can guide our inner lives, those lines have been important lately. Along with eight lines by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who knew that, if we live our lives well, our days and years themselves become poems:

O, tell us, poet, what do you do? -- I praise.
But those dark, deadly, devastating ways,
how do you bear them, suffer them? – I praise.
And then the Nameless, beyond guess or gaze,
how can you call it, conjure it? – I praise.
And whence your right in every kind of maze,
in every mask, to remain true? – I praise.
And that the mildest and the wildest ways
know you like star and storm – Because I praise.

Peter ended his sermon by saying that most sermons suggest that the Pilgrims were thankful, at that first Thanksgiving, because they themselves had survived, while many others did not. He questioned that. He believed, and I have now come to agree with him, that perhaps **they were able to survive because first they knew how to be thankful.** Always and everywhere. Under all circumstances. Even in those dark, deadly devastating ways, beyond guess or gaze. They still knew to how to praise.

So this Thursday, whether you sit down with family, some whom you may love deeply, some whom you may be tempted to envy; or even if you sit down alone, do give thanks, and praise. For in the midst of all life's challenges there remains the unmerited beauty of being itself; a gift.

May we receive that gift, every day of our lives, in gratitude. Growing, less conditioned gratitude. Until finally we also grow in our capacity to respond – to the gift of being, to one another, to the opportunities that each new day presents. And therein to become more grateful, more able to respond, more mature.

Who knows? Maybe in time a fool like myself can learn to become grateful even for embarrassing moments that expose my pesky little ego as, of all things, most dispensable. For the human vulnerability that people share with me, as I do with them, as a kind of communion, in which the sacramental elements are laughter and tears. Not just gratitude for the better, or the easy parts of life; or for being somehow better off than others are. But gratitude for all that is my life. That is the life we share.

May we all not only survive, but thrive, in the months and years ahead. Strengthened by learning to give thanks unconditionally, and praise forever the source and resource of the lives we share. Amen, and amen.