

The Awareness in Thanksgiving

Preached at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
Sunday, October 10, 2010

When I saw the suggested readings for today, I have to say I was elated. The healing story from Luke's gospel is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. Often, it is read on Thanksgiving, but it is **even better** to read it on just an ordinary Sunday, allowing ourselves to really ponder gratitude.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart's words are often quoted, "*If the only prayer we ever said was 'Thank You' – it would be **enough***". But notice, he calls that act a prayer. What does it mean to pray our gratitude? Let me share a famous poem of e.e. cummings:

*i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes (**i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth day of life and love and wings: and of the gay great happening illimitably earth**) how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any-lifted from the no of all nothing-human merely being doubt unimaginable You? (**now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened**).*

I want to bring your attention to two different lines in that wonderful poem. The very last one (repeat), which Jesus himself would say to his followers, “*Let the one who has ears, hear.*” When we are grateful, we are fully present – we are residing in the moment with complete awareness. We wake up.

The other line comes from the second stanza: *i who have died am alive again today.* This is extremely relevant to our gospel story. I’m sure all of us have some idea how devastating the disease of leprosy was at the time of Jesus. Lepers were shunned from society. They had to call out continuously to warn people of their illness. They suffered not only from their physical condition, but from a sense of spiritual exile as well. **Lepers were considered sinners.**

And here is Jesus, extending his hand, extending himself, daring to touch, daring to heal. Now, this is my question to you. **Does the healing moment occur when the man is cleansed of his leprosy, or when he returns to give thanks?** *And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice.* One of the synonyms for the word “**gratitude**” is “**recognition**.” The Samaritan man recognized that *i who have died am **alive again** today.*

Jesus restored him to health, restored him to **himself**. This man could go no further, he could not move forward, without returning to give thanks. So. Once more. **Does the healing moment occur when the man is cleansed of his leprosy, or when he returns to give thanks?** And not in a quiet voice, mind you. He is

shouting his gratitude as he returns, as he once used to shout, warning people of his disease.

Regina Sara Ryan says, “Gratitude is so close to the bone of life, pure and true, that it instantly stops the rational mind, and all its planning and plotting.” This man was speaking from his **heart**. Now here is something from my own life. I love my mother, **and** we have a complex relationship, as many mothers and daughters do. Just a few months ago, the day after Easter Sunday to be precise, my mother and I had a difficult exchange. I lost my patience with her, which I instantly regretted, and she **receded** from me.

It was a long, arduous way back to loving communication. Later, praying over it, I wrote this poem: *Regarding the Matter of Impatience with My Mother. I rejoice in my frailty – for how else would I know – where I end – and the power of God begins.* I recognized, in my prayer, the many graces. I was actually able to **give thanks** for the painful episode with my mother, because it helped me see. *Now the eyes of my eyes are opened.*

Like the Samaritan man, I knew where my power ended, and the power of God began. And, as I have suggested earlier, my true healing came when I was able to return to that moment and give God thanks. The wonderful Indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello said, “You **sanctify** whatever you are grateful for.” “Sanctify” is such a beautiful word – it means to consecrate – to make holy – to hallow.

So, even these events in our lives that we are deeply ashamed of can be hallowed, bringing us closer and closer to our loving God.

In one translation I found of Psalm 111, the psalmist says: *God has filled each day with his splendor, and given us eyes to see, hearts that can comprehend, spirits that stand in awe.* When I hear the words *spirits that stand in awe* I imagine being on Holy Ground. The Samaritan man came back and fell at the feet of Jesus, who was Holy Ground to him.

I wonder how the Samaritan man lived after his encounter with Jesus? Though he was healed of his disease, he was still a foreigner, still an outsider. Chances are he had many difficult days. How, then, do we not only **give** thanks – how do we **live** in the landscape of Thanksgiving?

The beautiful Russian poet Anna Akhmatova said this: *Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold. Death's great black wing scrapes the air, misery gnaws to the bone. **Why then do we not despair?** By day, from the surrounding woods, cherries blow summer into town; at night the deep transparent skies glitter with new galaxies. And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined, dirty houses – something not known to anyone at all, but wild in our breast for centuries.*

In spite of much hardship and tragedy for her people, she is aware of the cherries blowing summer into town and the skies glittering with new galaxies. She is living, as poets do, **immersed** in the present moment, where the miraculous

comes so close, musing on the mysterious wildness which keeps us from despair.

Some might call that **faith**.

The poet Tony Hoagland says, “*We would give anything for what we have.*”

Let me end this reflection with a poem entitled *Song of Gratitude – Too much attention on absence. Let the bitterness fall away. The world claims impossibility. But you know better – the heart is wide. Open every window – knock a hole in the roof. Let it all come pouring, streaming in. Remember the light in Paris – an indescribable gold. Place what is broken back to back. Let it be a bridge and desire the glue. See how it holds from within. See what you are blessed with.*

Christine Rodgers

Benediction

In the gift of this day, in the gift of this present moment, let me be thankful, let me be attentive, let me be open to what has never happened before. And the people say: “Amen”.

Christine Rodgers is an actor and poet living in San Francisco. Her poetry has appeared in *America, National Catholic Reporter, Fellowship, Radical Grace* and on a variety of websites. She has published two collections of poetry, *Into the Great Green Heart of God*, and *Upon a Luminous Night*. Her third book, *Embracing the Sacred Journey*, will be published later this year.