

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
November 18, 2001 Worship Service (Thanksgiving Sunday)

The Power of Gratitude

Edited Transcript of Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers' sermon

Scripture References: Psalm 92: 1-5; Ezekiel 36:25-26

I extend to each one of you here this morning an invitation. It is an invitation to cultivate gratefulness as your basic attitude toward life; an invitation to cultivate gratefulness as the very ground of your being. Gratefulness is extraordinarily powerful. It is one of the most powerful forces in the world. Gratefulness makes all the difference between going through the motions and really being alive. Gratefulness is the difference between having a heart of stone and receiving a heart of flesh from the Lord.

The 20th century Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that it is only through gratitude that life becomes rich. The Koran says that if you count God's blessings, you will not be able to number them. And there's a Jewish proverb that says we will never know all that we should be grateful to God for.

Gratefulness is extraordinarily powerful. Thomas Merton in his book *No Man is an Island* said that someone who is ungrateful admits that they do not know God. And he goes on to say that if we are not aware of our gratitude, we don't really know who we, ourselves, are; and we are not in touch with our life and what it means to be alive and to truly *be*.

To be grateful is to be a recipient of a gift. And the most basic gift is life itself. Each of our lives is a given: a gift given to us.

Emanuel Swedenborg is very clear, especially in his book *Divine Love and Wisdom*, that we ourselves are not *life*, but we are recipients of life, receptacles of life, vessels of life—cups into which life is poured. Life itself is holy. Life itself is divine. Swedenborg says that the more open our heart, the more open we are to receiving this divine influx of life; hence, the more full of life we are.

One of the most powerful ways to open our hearts to allow God freedom to remove our heart of stone and to give to us a heart of flesh is by becoming in touch with our thankfulness, our gratitude. Now sometimes this is really easy, right? When things are going just how you want them to go or when something surprises you in a most delightful way, it feels spontaneous: gratitude just wells up in us and we feel joy. But other times, every now and then, it's a little tougher.

A Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, has delineated three steps that he says that can always be found in gratitude. These steps happen spontaneously when things are going well, but at other times they require conscious intervention. The three steps rely upon the work of our intellect, our will, and our emotions.

The first step needs the work of our intellect. In order to feel grateful we need to recognize the

gift with our intellect needs. Again sometimes this is really easy, and sometimes it's hard. In order to recognize the gift we need to wake up, we need to notice, we need to see: *Ah! A gift!* God has planted, sprinkled, placed gifts uncountable in every moment, but our intellect needs to recognize them as gifts. We need to wake up, to get our nose out of whatever we're doing and step back just for a moment to *see*.

The second thing we need to do requires our will; that is, we need to acknowledge the gift. First we need to recognize the gift and then we need to acknowledge it. We need to say, "Ah, you! I know you!"

To acknowledge a gift means that we're acknowledging something outside of ourselves because a gift does not come from us, it comes from someone or somewhere else. To acknowledge a gift is actually very powerful because when we acknowledge a gift, we are stepping outside of our isolation and our aloneness. This is an act of will.

There's a tendency in us human beings, especially we Americans, to believe that we're self-sufficient and totally independent and that we don't need others. We may not think this with our minds, but we may live this with our hearts thinking that we've got it all together, just ourselves. Being able to acknowledge a gift is stepping out of our sense of isolation and aloneness. And

when we are able to do this with our will, we are able to connect and form a common unity and step into intimacy.

And the third thing we need to do in order to experience gratitude requires our emotions. We need to accept the gift with our whole heart . We need to say “yes!”

I think recognizing a gift is like being asked to dance. Someone is saying, “dance with me” and we accept with our whole heart and say, “Yes, I will step into this crazy, wild, chaotic, confusing, sometimes-distressing dance.”

The only way to say yes and accept the gift is with open arms. You can’t accept a gift with your arms folded across your chest. You can only accept a gift with your arms wide open. Yet we all know what’s scary about holding our arms wide open, don’t we? For example, let’s say you’re at a dance and it looks like someone across the room is looking at you and smiling at you and the impression you have is that they are asking you, “will you dance with me?” and you say, “yes!” And then they walk right by you and dance with the person behind you. You feel crushed and humiliated and embarrassed. You were *open*.

Being grateful does not protect us from embarrassment, humiliation, pain, and sorrow; it doesn’t protect us from any of that. But if we are able to incorporate gratitude into our basic attitude toward life and make it a part of the ground of our being, it gives us a place to go [spiritually.] [So] when those painful or sad feelings are happening they are not *all* of what’s happening. In

Swedenborgianese, we call this a *both/and*. Counting your blessings does not mean that you no longer feel the grief that you feel or the confusion or the sorrow. It means you're feeling all of that and you're also feeling a sense of warmth, peace, and connection.

In the example when where we're mistakenly thinking that we're being asked to dance, how can we find gratitude in that moment? Well, we can be grateful that we realized that we *wanted* to dance. And we can go out and find other ways to bring dancing into our life.

One more example from my own life and then I'm going to give you three explicit ways of practicing gratitude. Last Thursday morning I had about four errands to do in different places around this wonderful city of ours. I went out and at the first place, I could not find a place to park. Can you believe it? I could not find a place to park. I looked and looked and I finally gave up on that first errand and I just headed off to the second errand. I couldn't find a place to park there either. I finally did stop in a yellow loading zone and ran in and out and went on to the third errand.

By that point I was talking to myself. I was saying, "What is this City coming to? You can't even go on a simple errand and park in front of where you want to go. This is ridiculous!" As I was talking to myself, I realized that I had a pretty self-righteous sense of entitlement. And then it must have been because I was working on this sermon that a little thought came into my head. "*Oh my goodness!* I'm alive! It is a beautiful day! I'm in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. If I need anything materially, I can go to a store and get it. And, no, I might not be able to

park right in front.” I realized what that sense of entitlement was doing. Then I let go of it and recognized the gift. I acknowledged the gift and I started naming it. And once I started I saw another gift and then another and then another, and I saw that my gifts were countless. I practically forgot what errand I was doing because I was so excited. I *appreciated* it. And then I got an extra bonus because I soon realized that I could use this as my example on Sunday! I can’t tell you what that’s worth!

There are, of course, countless ways to incorporate these steps of gratitude into our daily lives; but here are three quick ones.

First: *This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!* You can say that to yourselves every morning when you wake up. What a wonderful way to start the day and invite gratitude in.

Second, when you say a prayer at your evening meal either by yourselves or with family members have each person name one thing that they’re grateful for that day and incorporate the answers into your prayer. Remember that *all* gratitudes are accepted, from the most basic to the most profound.

Finally, throughout your day if you find yourself getting irritated or a bit upset, take it upon yourself as a challenge to find gold in that moment and in that experience. That doesn’t mean that you have to be grateful that things are not going the way you wanted them; you do not have

to be grateful that you can't find a parking place. But do find gratitude in the experience. Have it be a treasure hunt with you and God. Remember those puzzles where you had to find objects hidden in the picture? Take this as a challenge then: whatever the experience, find the gratitude in it. And let that gratitude touch you and fill you. It will not wipe away the painful feelings, but it will help you feel some peace and joy at the same time.

The Lord said, *"I give to you a new heart and I put a new spirit within you. I remove from you your heart of stone and I give you a heart of flesh."* Amen.