



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Gift of a Grateful Heart

*Sermon preached at the six o'clock service, November 23, 2016
Thanksgiving Eve—Based on John 6:25-35 and Philippians 4:4-9*

"Thou that has given so much to me, give one thing more—a grateful heart."

The Anglican poet George Herbert, over four hundred years ago, captured with those prayerful words one of life's deepest truths: that of all gifts the greatest is gratitude.

Thanksgiving Day is an annual moment when we as a country stop to express our amazement and thank God for our life together in this country and earth. "Come ye thankful people, come" the old harvest hymn bids us ... give thanks for the fruit of creation, the "purple mountains' majesty," the grace of community, the sun in the morning and the moon at night. Sing praise.

Such thanksgiving is more urgent than usual I believe. Gratitude is in too short supply at the moment. It is a spiritual deficit as urgent as the national debt. It's every bit as much a need as coming to terms with a new presidential administration. One of the dark enchantments of a consumer economy is its way of continually showing us what we do not have and tempting us with what we crave and deserve and need. Like Blake's fallen Adam we find ourselves saying, "I want. I want," chronically restless and anxious for ever more than we have. As Walter Brueggemann has stated: "Today, the fundamental human condition continues to be anxiety, fueled by a market ideology that keeps pounding on us to take more, to not think about our neighbor, to be fearful, short-sighted, grudging. Over and over, we're told to be sure we have the resources to continue our affluent lifestyles, especially in the midst of perceived scarcity."

The only thing that can break that cycle of craving and anxiety is the gift of gratitude. So I ask on this Thanksgiving Eve in the heart of Midtown Manhattan: How do we cultivate a grateful heart?

First, we can learn to celebrate imperfect gifts. Joy dies for people who can be grateful only for perfect gifts. You may know the story of the preacher who asked the rhetorical question in the middle of his sermon: "Is there anyone who is perfect in the congregation?" He expected no one to overtly respond, but one older gentleman stood up in the back. Startled, the preacher asked the man, "Yes, sir, are you perfect?" He said, "No, I'm standing up for my wife's first husband." This side of heaven there are no perfect people and no perfect gifts. Thus, we are bid to be grateful for that which is imperfect but is usable for the kingdom of God.

Second, we can prime the pump of gratitude by saying "thank you"—again and again and again. There have been times in all of our lives that if someone told us that our life was a gift, we would want to give it back. Even when we're not overwhelmed with thanksgiving, it is important to say "Thank you" anyway. Not because of obligation but because it keeps open the window of gratitude. As C. S. Lewis said, "The line between pretending to feel something and beginning to feel it is too thin for a moral bloodhound to sniff."

Third, it's also important to remember that we can be grateful for one thing in spite of something else. Most silver linings have a few clouds. We readily ask: How can I be grateful for my life when, say, my friend is being devoured with cancer? How dare I be full of praise for this country, for this church, for daily food, for shelter, for health care when there are millions of people who don't enjoy these benefits? And yet if we waited for the world's needs to be fulfilled, we will never have a grateful moment.

And, last, gratitude usually comes in the wake of a tough patch in life. It's really true ... We usually have our biggest moments of praise and thanksgiving when we have moved through a difficult period that threatened to do us in, and we came out of it intact. It is in those moments that we fulfill Augustine's dictum that if we don't say "alleluia" at least four times a day we are either dead or not paying attention.

When we look at life with grateful hearts, we see not what is missing but what is there. No matter the challenges, there is always enough. Indeed our cups overflow.

Thanks be to God!