

Morning Meditation ~ Gratitude

The reflections this week are based on Diana Butler Bass' book, *Grateful*. May the words below open you to God's grace and love this day.

What comes into your mind when you hear the word, "Gratitude"? Maybe you are familiar with phrase like, "Thanks-living" or "An Attitude of Gratitude". Maybe you have tried to keep a gratitude journal or jar, where each day you write down one, two, or three events/experiences/encounters for which you are thankful. For some, gratitude can feel forced, like when our mothers told us we had to say thank you to that relative who gave us underwear for our birthday. Seriously, who does that? Other times we just don't feel like, I am looking at you year of 2020. There have been multiple times the five-year-old Wes has stomped his foot this year in protest and said (to no one in particular), "I don't wanna!!" Diana Butler Bass writes, "I often feel the tension between knowing gratitude is good and being unable to feel deeply thankful or practice gratefulness on a regular basis. I long to be the sort of person who lives appreciatively, but I often fall short of that desire."

Is gratitude something that comes naturally to you? Or do you find yourself feeling like you are grasping at straws after number 4 on your top ten list of thanksgivings for today?

If, like me, you find yourself occasionally struggling to name a person or place that is honestly or heartfully awakening gratitude in this day God has made, there might be a few reasons for this. First, we are fed a steady diet of a negative news cycle twenty-four hours a day. My grandmother, who lived through the depression, didn't have CNN on in the background with that dramatic music every few minutes telling her one more disparaging tidbit. I am not advocating for going completely off the grid, but I do wonder if every tweet is worthy of living rent-free in our minds and tugging at our emotional strings. I think we have a lot of work to do to dig into whether we are consuming the news or it is consuming us. Second, because we know people are struggling right now economically and physically and emotionally, we don't want to come across as gloating that our life is all chocolate cream pies by the pool.

Yet, to say, "Thank you," is a basic prayer. To pay attention to traces of God's grace can open us to what God is up to in the world around us. Gratitude is another way of saying, the holy is woven into the world alongside the difficult, sometimes the two can be one in the same. For example, the last few months of trying to learn new ways of ministry have been challenging. And, at the same time, these new ways are opening new opportunities. I give thanks that I now post these morning meditations and for Livestreaming on Facebook and our Story People series on Thursdays and for Zoom conversations. These are honest, heartfelt, and holy moments.

For whom do you feel grateful for today?

Is there someone you could say, "Thank you" to today, especially if you are venturing out to an appointment or the store with people working on the frontline?

Let the word, "gratitude" rummage and roam around your life today. See where your mind might raise objections and your soul shine a light that God is still creating/crafting in such a time as this.

Prayer: God open my heart today to the swells and stirrings of Your presence that bring a smile to my face. Amen.

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If I was to create and craft a top twelve thanksgiving list it would certainly include family and friends whose love make a difference; cool breezes on sunny days; our dog, Asha,; good books; opportunities to help; chocolate; moments of laughter; music that stirs my soul; chocolate; quiet times when I can breathe; goosebumps that tell me I am in the presence of the holy...and chocolate. And before you point out that I repeated myself, in my defense, chocolate comes in many forms – all of which we should be thankful!

Diana Butler Bass writes, “Gratitude is not warm feelings about what we have.” Pause with me, because I think we conflate or confuse “Gratitude” with “Happiness” and with “Joy”. Yet, each of those words mean something slightly different. Gratitude doesn't just surf the surface of life but is willing to dive deeper into a truth. Gratitude goes looking for the good, the holy, the harmony. Gratitude is curious. Gratitude turns the exasperated, “Now what?” questions into an opportunity to see if God might be up to something in that moment. To be sure, there are moments the holy still confounds us and we don't quite understand fully. Bass continues, “Gratitude is the ability to embrace the gift of who we are. That we are. In the multibillion year history of the universe, the gift is that each of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness, and has a story. Life (yes, even life during a pandemic) is a gift. And when the mystery fills our hearts, it overwhelms us, and a deep river of emotions flow forth.”

The fact that you are...and that there will never be another you again on this planet...is a mysterious miracle. The fact that you are here right now...and that all we have is this present (another word for “gift”) moment...is a mysterious miracle. Just to breathe in this moment and to listen to it fully. Bass goes on to suggest that today you take ten minutes for silence, sit somewhere you will not be disturbed, and set a timer on your phone. During the silence just keep repeating the words, “I am. We all are.” What do you experience? What happens in the silence? Is there a sense of gratitude that stirs for this prayer practice?

Prayer: God whose name is, “I AM” help me be open to You in the silence and in the interactions with others today. Go before, beside, behind, and within me, I pray. Amen.

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What challenges are you discovering in your prayerful dialogue with gratitude this week? What evidence keeps presenting itself as countering the claim that each day offers gifts to evoke gratitude— or as the psalmist sang – where our cup overflowth?

Gratitude moves from the abstract to a prayer practice when we chose to cultivate this as an important way in our life. Bass writes, “Gratitude is an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions. Gratitude involves not just what we feel but what we do. ‘Thanks’ is both a noun and a verb.” I find it interesting that “thanks” could be a verb or an action or a practice. She goes on to give the example of a thank you note and that you could write to someone today as a prayer practice.

I also know that gratitude can be complicated and complex. Sometimes when someone says, “Thank you,” we can feel awkward because we may not believe that we deserved the praise or concerned that we won’t be able to live up to the expectations. Sometimes we get thanked for something we did with less than a glad and generous heart. For example, you lend your neighbor a tool thinking that you will never see it again; only to get it back the next day with a plate of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. Suddenly, you are swimming in an emotional stew as you try to grin your way through the moment.

When was a moment you said, “Thank you,” but didn’t feel it?
When was a moment you were thanked and felt your soul shift uncomfortably?

Gratitude, like a family of four going on a two-week vacation, is a word that can bring a lot of baggage. And we need to unpack why our minds or hearts or souls might not be comfortable embracing and embodying this word. Gratitude is generative, meaning that the more we practice saying, “Thank you,” the more the thanksgiving can build upon itself.

Today, I invite you into all the beautiful complexity of living with the word, “Gratitude”. To be a detective of your own life sleuthing out the good, the bad, and the ugly ways you have experienced or encountered this word throughout your life and throughout today. I invite you to be open to the new ways this word might be working in your life.

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for companions in the journey of gratitude who are willing to roll up their sleeves and share their perspectives on this word and what it might mean in such a time as this. Amen.

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Last Sunday, we sang the hymn, “*For the Fruit of All Creation*”

For the fruit of all creation, thanks be to God.

For God’s gifts to every nation, thanks be to God.

For the plowing, sowing, reaping,

silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth's safekeeping, thanks be to God.

For the harvests of the Spirit, thanks be to God.
For the good we all inherit, thanks be to God.
For the wonders that astound us,
For the truths that still confound us,
Most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God.

This hymn is a holy workbook of the ways "Gratitude" can work. First, gratitude is slow, steady work like a seed. Just as a sunflower or watermelon or banana tree doesn't grow overnight, nor does cultivating thanksgiving in our lives. It takes plowing, sowing, silent growth while we are sleeping. It takes tending and holding back because you can work the ground so much that you damage the root system. Second, sometimes things that bring smiles to our faces, our minds cannot fully comprehend. I love the line, "For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us." I give thanks for the truth of God's love. I cannot prove love. I cannot put God's love under a microscope or micromanage the holy embrace. I can receive God's love day-after-day.

Diana Butler Bass writes, "Social scientists have discovered that positive emotions of gratitude drives out negative emotions like fear and anxiety; that practicing gratitude creates new connections of community. (When we share what we are thankful for, we feel a deeper connection and our hearts are strangely warmed.) Thankfulness creates personal well-being and fosters the common good. Being a grateful person means being resilient in crisis and strengthens us to resist injustice." Some of the most grateful people I admire like Nelson Mandela; Bishop Tutu; Barbara Brown Taylor; Rob Bell; and Mary Oliver tell about times a light shined within them even during difficult/dark days. They dug deep into life and found a sacred source to sustain them and that they shared with others. They didn't throw in the towel or pass along their pain through negative posts on Twitter or live the cliché that "Misery loves company". Rather, they sought another way. That way does confound us and is complicated and requires practice.

Pause today to reflect on a time when you were walking through a valley moment. A time when the stress and strain of life sat heavy on your heart – a time when you lost a job or a relationship ended or a dream didn't come true. Hold your history lightly and ask, is there anything in that experience I can now give thanks for (realizing fully that in the moment you might not have felt grateful for any of what you were living)? Hold your history, lean in and listen and learn, and know that even now in such a time as this, there might be sparks of light that can guide us with grace and love.

Prayer: Crafting and creating God, create in me a new heart; plant in the soil of my soul new seeds; and water my words and actions today with a reminder of who and whose I am. Amen.

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Bass writes, "The practice of gratitude comes down to attentiveness and awareness. All around us, every day, there are gifts. No matter our challenges or feelings. There are gifts. Mostly unnoticed, unappreciated, and often disregarded. But if we cultivate our awareness of those gifts, thankfulness becomes a habit. (And out of that habit) gratitude becomes a companion."

I love the idea of gratitude being a companion. What response/reaction do you have to that idea? Maybe you still sense that gratitude is not a reliable companion, like the one who tells you to turn left when you really want to go right. Like the companion who tells you to try some new dish at a restaurant even when you are not sure what Brokoli 'Apollo' is. By the way it is a veggie hybrid of broccoli and kale.

I pray that over the last week, you have begun a new relationship with the companion of gratitude. Thanksgiving can open our hearts and eyes to new ways of sensing and exploring the world around us and within us. Maybe, like me, you are curious about continuing to cultivate a relationship with the companion of gratitude.

Bass goes on to say that we need signs that remind us of how gratitude is all around us. She talks about a symbol like a prayer book where you record a gratitude every day or a candle you light to reflect on thanksgiving. Bass also names that ordinary, everyday things can help evoke and invite us into paying attention to gratitude. She talks about how the smell of coffee can remind you to give thanks. Or when you wash the dishes as a moment to have a conversation with the companion of gratitude. When gratitude is tied to something you see or a sensation, we can pay more attention and be more aware to its presence in our lives.

What cue can nudge you to pay attention and be aware of gratitude?

When can you intentionally and prayerfully let gratitude pick the radio station in your life?

If you want to explore gratitude more visit: www.gratefulness.org

May the One who moves in our midst with more grace and love than we can ever imagine awaken your heart and tune your life toward a holiness that is holding us even in such a time as this. Grace and peace to you now more than ever. Amen.