Generosity and Gratitude
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Unitarian Universalist Church of St. Petersburg
August 12, 2012

Responsive Reading

#512 “We Give Thanks This Day” – in Singing the Living Tradition

Sermon

Is anyone here rich? If you are rich, can you please raise your hand?
That’s hard to believe!! Go figure, there’s not a single person in this
congregation named Richard…

It’s understandable, that when I asked you that question, you automatically
assumed that I was referring to wealth. But riches come in many flavors.
I’m reminded of this fact by a saying that is displayed on a little plaque that
hangs in our house. It’s a saying that some of you might know. It goes:

Rich is not how much you have, or where you are going or even who
you are. Rich is who you have beside you.

I used to think that this saying was somewhat trite and hackneyed. But
when Jane and I started to work on preparing for this service, which deals
with the themes of generosity and gratitude, it was this particular saying
that first came to mind. And so then I thought… well maybe this saying has
some merit, especially if you interpret “who you have besides you” in
different ways. Perhaps the “who” isn’t another person; it could be a group
of people – like this community; or maybe it’s not a who as in a person or a
group of people, but a “who” as in your faithful companion, like your dog,
your cat or even your hamster; or maybe the “who” could be more cosmic
in scale – like the earth, the galaxy or even the universe.
I’ve actually come to like this saying because it reminds me in very simple terms that the most important things in my life, the things that have given it meaning, that have made it rich, are not found in any success I might have achieved, or talents I might possess, but rather in everyone and everything that has touched my life, and has made me who I am today.

And I’m grateful because I understand that I am utterly dependent on everyone and everything: on my parents who gave me birth and raised me, on my partner Dean and everyone else in my life who have helped me, on the animals and plants which nourish me, on the air that I breath, and the sun which warms and lights my path. I understand that I do not exist in isolation. I am defined by the people who have touched my life, and the natural world in which I live. And everything I do impacts someone or something. I do not exist in nature. I am part of nature.

The interconnectedness of all being has been part of our religious tradition for a very long time. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who for a time was a Unitarian minister, believed that all creation is One. And since we are all One, he reasoned we’re all in this life together, and, consequently, our destiny is dependent on us alone. This notion of the Oneness of all being is also part of our Universalist heritage. Religious universalism is most frequently understood to be about a rejection of the concept of Hell and predestination, and a belief in Universal Salvation – that all souls will be reconciled to God. But the theology of universalism goes much deeper. It’s the belief that all of humankind is created with an immortal soul, which death does not end, and that all souls will ultimately conform to the perfection of God. We will all be saved because we are all connected. We are all One.
I believe the natural religious response to this interconnectedness of all being should be one of awe, reverence, and, mostly, gratitude. Our faith is a lifelong expression of gratitude, and that gratitude manifests itself in the form of generosity to others. Most people think generosity begets gratitude; but in fact it works the other way around – gratitude engenders generosity.

The Gospels tell us to cultivate a life of gratitude. Expressing gratitude as generosity can take many forms: words, of course, but also financial support, and action. We can be generous with our time, treasure and talent. And there’s another type of generosity that we can practice which is particularly appropriate in a religious community – and that is generosity of spirit. What is generosity of spirit? I think it’s putting others before yourself; being nonjudgmental; allowing others to have the final word. It’s projecting an air of serenity and compassion in our demeanor, seeking to understand rather than be understood.

So our response to feeling rich, of being grateful to one another should be one of generosity. But because we are human - there are times when some of us haven’t felt rich; when we haven’t felt grateful. Usually this happens when we realize that not everyone shares our exact values or ideas about what’s most important. And sometimes it happens when we think we’ve given too much of our time, talent or treasure, and it hasn’t been acknowledged or appreciated.

It’s during those times that we start to pull back, to withdraw, to be less generous, and, sadly, sometimes we go away, and sever the bond of community which unites us.
And that’s why faith is necessary. Our faith, which is a profoundly optimistic faith, forces us to leave our caravan of despair, and calls us to come again and give thanks because gratitude is not only a fleeting emotion, it’s a religious discipline – it’s our particular religious discipline.

Just as Christians are defined by the commandment to love one another, Jews by obedience to the law and Muslims by submission to the will of Allah, I believe we Unitarian Universalists ought to be defined by the practice and discipline of gratitude. Being thankful for life, for this day, for this very moment, and for everyone who touches our lives is what gives life its meaning. And it’s what makes us want to be generous; to give back for getting so much - even when we have been let down by others, or when we have disappointed ourselves. Our discipline of gratitude calls us to be generous and sow the seeds of transforming love in our congregation and beyond, so that others who come after us may enjoy a better world that we will not live to see.

Fortunately, we have been blessed with many members in our congregation who have heeded the call to generosity, and who have embraced a life of gratitude and service. Members like Patricia McGiverin, whose memory we honor today. Pat has left an indelible mark on our congregation, as well as on the many other charities she supported. She will be remembered as someone who gave quietly, generously and lovingly, and who touched many lives. Patricia McGiverin, and people like her, will continue to make this world a better place even after their passing. And while many of us may not have the means that Pat had, please know that true generosity is not measured by the size of the gift, but rather by what it cost the giver.
So, let’s honor Pat’s memory by striving to be more like her. And let’s try to remember every day how much we have to be grateful for, by acknowledging the scope of our dependence. It’s about saying “thank you” to the people we love, to the world we enjoy and which nourishes us, and to the transcendent spirit of life and mystery of the divine which unites everyone and everything.

So this is the day we are given. Let us rejoice and be glad in it because…

…Rich is not how much you have, or where you are going or even who you are. Rich is who you have beside you.

May it be so.