

Interfaith Thanksgiving service 2017

“Gratitude Counts”

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." *Albert Einstein*

A couple of weeks back, my body gave into a full-on virus that knocked me over for several days. The cough is still hanging on. I've wondered if was the smoke we all inhaled day after day finally working its way out of my lungs, or if it was the stress we all experienced working its way out of my bones, or perhaps it is just the same old gunga we all get every year- just showing up a little early.

Whatever the case, as things begin to return to the new normal, I spend a lot of time thinking about gratitude.

I'll be honest, I tried to practice gratitude while I was under the weather; to feel grateful for the pile of warm blankets that surrounded me and the luxury of a job that would allow me to take sick days. Tried to feel grateful for Pip the pup and Wonder the kitten who happily companioned me as I recovered. Try as I might, gratitude felt like a chore.

But as I drove down West Spain toward the church on Thursday, I noticed that feeling gratitude got easier. I felt grateful to be able to return to my routine. Grateful to reconnect with the people I see when I go to work, who always bring joy to my heart.

This may sound silly, but as I stopped at the four way stop sign, I was filled with gratitude for four way stop signs- what else in our world provides an opportunity to pause, look one another in the eyes and then take turns.

My great grandmother lived with my aunt Dorothy for a time on what is now, or was until a few weeks ago, the Bouverie Preserve.

We used to visit her in the summer, we would get to milk the goats, feed the chickens and collect the eggs. All of this was very novel to a kid from the suburbs of Southern California.

I could not have known then that a decade later my family would move into a house above Oakmont and that several decades later I would again call this area home.

I remember two things in particular about those long-ago Sonoma visits, the first was the long walk to the mailbox to collect the post each day- I thought it was so cool to have to walk down a dirt road to get to the mail box. Now I live on a dirt road, off Agua Caliente where I walk to get the mail every day.

Second was the way great grandmother Crabtree smelled of violets and rose milk. She used to say every night before going to sleep, "count your blessings one by one, before the day is done." Great grandmother Crabtree lived to be one hundred and one.

Theologian and poet Brother David Steindl-Rast writes: "It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy." Sure enough as soon as I begin to make a list in my mind of things for which I'm grateful, my mood shifts.

I am grateful for the rains that have come since the fires, and the sun that shines through the leaves that are still on the vines. I'm grateful for the memories that Thanksgiving always brings. I am grateful that in my lifetime I have known wise and loving elders and been challenged by younger thinkers.

I'm grateful that my daughter, who is eight. isn't yet too cool for Mommy cuddles. I am grateful for Sunday night suppers at my parent's house. I am grateful for a spouse who challenges and supports me, and a church community that does the same.

I wonder what you are grateful for today, can you think of three things?

On the third day of visiting the High School shelter during the fires, I encountered a family in need of support. They had two children- one with both asthma and special needs. And even though the smoke was very hard on their child, they felt that they could not leave Sonoma because they wanted to be close when it was possible to go back to work again. Their only source of income is an hourly job wage at a gas station in Glen Ellen.

Because a generous gift had been entrusted to our church, I was able to help that family get what they needed it the most, too pay some looming bills; so that they could leave and find somewhere safe to stay. Fish, La Luz and others are now offering that support for so many in the Valley and for that we are all grateful.

I ran into that same family again recently. They have returned to their home, work and school. Do you know what they said to me, they said, they were so grateful that someone had helped them through a difficult time, and because they had been helped, they were able to help other people.

And there's the take home bit. Gratitude is not self-serving. Gratitude as a spiritual practice fills us up so that we can be of service in this world. A grateful heart is a generous heart.

And there of course the opposite is also true- a heart that is mired in worry and scarcity, is clenched and tight, it withholds rather than offers, it takes because it is afraid to give.

Gratitude is both a gift-to the one who gives it and to the one who receives it. It builds joy because it allows us to ground ourselves in hopefulness and possibility for ourselves and for one another.

The instruction are there in the words, ThankFUL=thanksGIVING. Inward outward, in a Holy rhythm of filling up and flowing out.

We have indeed known great sorrow this past month and we also have much for which to be grateful. Let it be our spiritual practice this holiday season to cultivate gratitude.

A grateful heart is a happy heart, a happy heart is a loving heart and those are the people we mean to be.
Amen