

## **“Gratitude and Grace”**

*A sermon delivered by the Reverend Alison Miller  
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I remember the switch from the school bus to the public bus quite well. I was ten years old and starting in a new school. My parents were nowhere to be seen as I climbed the stairs of the big blue bus a couple of blocks from home on Madison Avenue. The world was expanding and soon enough I could get anywhere on my own. I looked back and scrutinized the mailboxes and all other hiding places. No my father was not shadowing me on the way to the bus this year. It was up to me to ‘look both ways’ and get it right. I was becoming an independent traveler and anything seemed possible now that I was on my own.

The bus stopped. I flashed my pass and inserted my two quarters in the machine which I had earned for some chore or another and made a satisfying sound as they hit the metal bottom... the clanging sound of freedom bells I thought. The bus stopped every two blocks, and a group of adults and children climbed on board and another group descended.

What was different about the leave taking then I remembered from my yellow bus the year before was that nobody seemed to say “thank you” as we all had to Joe, the bus driver, the year before? I wondered about that guy in the front of the bus that nobody seemed to mind and whether I would ever see him again. In my mind’s eye, I could hear all their parents saying, “Now what do you say?” as they approached the giant steps towards the street below. But they didn’t! Was it kid’s stuff to say ‘thank you’ just ‘cuz we couldn’t drive yet or was it different because we all had paid for our rides? I saw my stop ahead, pulled the cord to signal and walked the semi-treacherous path towards the front of the bus as I had seen the others do before me.

I was just learning how to do this thing and soon realized that next time I would wait ‘til the bus stopped. It would require a few more years, many more pounds and a lot more practice before I could safely navigate a moving city bus. Habit formed in my throat as I rounded the bus driver’s area to step off the bus. “Thank you,” I said. For a split second, I wondered whether that was the right thing to do. He jerked his head around as if disturbed from a kind of slumber, a broad smile swept across his face, and he replied, “Your welcome.” I thought to myself, maybe the others got it wrong.

What an illusion I had at ten years old, to think I would ever gain the freedom to be totally responsible for everything I did. The floors and the pavements, the very

ground I walked on that day was a result of someone else's labor. What a misunderstanding of human nature to imagine myself as independent. The home I left and the school I was heading towards were both filled with people without whom I could not learn, love or live. What a delusion to wonder whether adulthood or money meant not having to say thank you. Most of gifts we receive in the course of an ordinary day are ones that we could never deserve either by the investment of time or finances; they are simultaneously gratis and of infinite worth. Yet, I admit that these illusions, misunderstandings, and delusions do creep into my brain from time to time to this day.

Two words, "thank" and "you" represent a simple but profound orientation about what it means to be human.

First, as much as we may have participated in getting "here," we could never have arrived without the help and contributions of others. Take today as an example.

Many of you drove yourselves here, but you did not invent the car, most likely did not build your car, and you are only partly responsible for having the means and opportunity to buy a car, if you own one.

The arrival at any destination – whether a physical location, a station in life, or a quality of being – is never something for which we could ever claim total responsibility. Human beings are dependent and interdependent creatures and never exist in any other state. Yet, our language and our myths tend to support an idea of self-sufficiency.

You might hear, "I appreciate a story about someone who pulled themselves up from their boots straps."

Or, "the story of child development is one of gaining independence."

Through such stories, we embrace the illusion of our separateness over and above all else. The problem is that rather than becoming bigger or enhancing our worth, these stories have tendency to shrink our world down to the smallest fraction – the part that we alone can take responsibility for.

Thank goodness this is an illusion. Awareness of this fact and of our deeply relational nature opens us up to a world of possibilities beyond what we could ever achieve on our own.

This orientation of awareness that everything we do and everything we have is in part due to an “other” also paradoxically allows our unique gifts, powers, and abilities to unfold in ways that would not be possible if we did not also accept the limits of our gifts, powers and abilities.

We accept our limits and embrace our interdependent nature by acknowledging the role that “other” people, forces of nature, and coincidences play in bringing us to the metaphorical “here.”

In order to do this fully, we must let go of the stories that cast us in the role of radical independence as the path to becoming “mature” and rewrite the script. The script becomes something like this...

The earth and the sun, water and carbon, aligned in such a unique way that a life-giving principle was born. Life is a gift.

My parents crossed paths long enough that I was born. My life is a gift.

My cells have cooperated with one another long enough that I have lived and survived about 17,000 days – some tranquil and others treacherous. Each day is a gift.

I live in Morristown, New Jersey, a place that has a unique history, landscape, and set of opportunities and challenges. This place I have arrived at partly by choices (mine and others) and partly by coincidences is a gift. The place I live is a gift.

I am a minister, a community organizer, a write, a mother, a wife, and friend amongst other identities. My way of being, my personality, and my experiences have led me to the “here of these relationships.” As much as I have free will and have made choices that led to this arrival, much of it is owed to an accident of birth – the ways my chemical make-up interacts with the world – the ways my mentors taught me to interact – and the coincidences of the chronology of chance meetings. My relationships are a gift.

I am a survivor of trauma and loss – the particulars have to do with cancer, death, and crime amongst others. The burdens along with of this life have been my spiritual teachers. They have brought out in me responses that might otherwise lay dormant –compassion, wisdom, and the will to survive. The challenges of life have been a gift. Even my burdens have offered gifts.

The meditation I have just shared continues without ceasing. The litany of things and events for which I could count among my blessings covers every inch of ground that has been traveled since before my birth to this very moment.

It is really about an orientation towards this life that is grounded in a perspective that the uniqueness of who we are, how we got here, and where we are is an offering – a gift that is ours to unwrap – to discover and to make use of while we can count on this day. That is something we are responsible for – that is to say – the unwrapping – of things that are simple, things that are joyful, things that are painful, things that are undeserved, things that have cost us a great deal, things that are invisible, like personalities, love, and hope.

The month of November as we lead up to Thanksgiving is not an opportunity to chide yourselves, if gratefulness is not what you feel at the moment, but it is an opportunity to invite gratefulness to the table of your life – hopefully in a fresh way.

Gratitude has a measurable impact on the quality of our lives, especially in the areas of our wellbeing, motivation, and relationships. Robert Emmons, the leading scientific expert on gratitude defines two components of gratitude. One is an affirmation that there are good things in the world from which we have benefited. Two is a recognition of where that goodness comes from – the people and things in our life that have conspired to give it to us.

While it is proven that some people have a greater disposition for gratitude than others due to nature or nurture – there are studies exploring certain genetic markers and studies that measure increased gratitude in the wake of practice (either because of how you were raised or an intentional practice) – the good news is it's never too late to start or to begin again.

In fact, studies of gratitude interventions show that sometimes taking a periodic fresh approach to a gratitude practice may matter more than a wrote, repetitive practice. The most commonly studied practice is of a gratitude journaling practice, and it turns out it doesn't matter whether the journaling is every day vs once a week. What does matter is a return to practicing gratitude and that it feels authentic – that the practice allows you to re-experience the feelings of appreciation, happiness, and connection again. Whether you write five things for which you are grateful for over the past week, or one thing a day you were grateful for today doesn't matter. What matters is what works best for your heart and mind and spirit...

It turns out that what matters is that it remain fresh – maybe there is wisdom in an annual holiday – to invite us each year to awaken again and to see the world as if it were the first day

As you journal, or some other time of reflection – a walk, meditation, or the like – you might want to focus on the four components of a gratitude practice as described by Andrea Hussong and her team on the Raising Grateful Children project.

1. Noticing. Stopping and paying attention when we're given something and recognizing the good things that already exist. Seeing the care behind what we receive.
2. Thinking. How do we think about why we received those things. We tend to feel more grateful when we believe it is spontaneous and unearned. Why were we given that particular gift?
3. Feeling. How do we feel about what we have been given? The happiness and/or the connection we experience in receiving can translate into grateful feelings.
4. Doing. What do we do to express appreciation in turn. Offering a thank you or a hug... or being inspired to pay it forward – giving to others so they have the positive experience of receiving.

Noticing. Thinking. Feeling. Doing. As we mature in age or in our practice we will grow into all four parts of gratitude.

Gratitude has an impact on our wellbeing, our motivation, and our relationships. The feeling of authentic gratitude releases chemicals and shows up in the parts of our brain that also light up when we relax and when we feel a release from pain. A practice of gratitude can help ease suffering (physical and psychological) and also promote a healthy heart and stronger immune system.

There are some who worry that focusing on what is good will remove motivation. But, studies show the opposite is true. People who are able to cultivate more thoughts and feelings of appreciation and actions of acknowledgement – paying attention and paying it forward – have more energy and appear to be more able to get things done. One reason may be that they recognize everything doesn't depend on them alone, so they do their part and take responsibility for that and appreciate what others do to make what they do possible. Gratitude grows our humility and our possibilities at the same time. Gratitude is rooted in relationship.

Gratitude is not a denial of what is wrong or unjust even as it is an affirmation of what is right. It is important to note that there are hardships that are out of our

control and those that human beings have created. Gratitude doesn't eliminate hardships, and it may serve to highlight them. If you aren't physically able to walk up steps or if you broke up with your significant other, gratitude will not eliminate the physical challenge or the sadness of these two examples. However, it may help you to see what other qualities you possess that allow you to rise in other ways and in the second example, it may lead to appreciation for an ending for what was no longer working.

However, as Barbara Ehrenreich cautions – gratitude isn't appropriate in every instance where you receive something. She gives this example: If a Walmart employee is given a \$1 raise to her \$9 an hour salary. Should she feel grateful to the Waltons, who are the richest family in America? Or to the CEO of Walmart who makes \$1 million a year. No. It matters who is giving and who is receiving, and what they are giving and what they are receiving. Is a \$1 raise in that case an authentic expression of mutuality and the worth and dignity of each person.

How might a CEO, who recognizes that they are where they are in life, because of earned and unearned gifts and incredible unearned privilege. How might an ethic of gratitude that promotes and puts communal wellbeing, mutual motivation, and authentic relationships at the center of a corporation, a congregation, a hospital, or any organization require changes to the structure and culture of that entity?

An ethic of gratitude helps us to see from the perspective of God or goodness more clearly. The farmer and the landowner were both only able to see themselves and their self-interest. The farmer wouldn't have the land to work had the owner not bought it. The landowner would not have such fertile soil had the farmer not taken such care. They are both partially responsible for the success.

Neither created the good earth on which they stood while having the argument, and that plot of earth will still be there after they are gone as it was before they were born. It was there unearned by either of them.

Gratitude is an invitation to enlarge the 'our' in counting our blessings, to enlarge the 'we' that we care about, and to recognize that while it is easy enough to say, it takes practice to do it faithfully and well our whole lives long. So, consider November, your annual checkup on how much thankfulness you have to harvest this year, and begin a plan for even more lush plantings for the next, so you'll have even more to give away. May it be so.