

## Pray

What are you thankful for? Thankfulness is not an act of defiance or a sentimental stance; thankfulness is asserting confidence, not in circumstances that beset us, but a God who loves us. I look forward to your thoughtful comments in just a few minutes. What are you thankful for?

Poet Maya Angelou wrote, "Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer, And, let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good."

Many things may prompt us to feel thankful. Our bible readings today urge us to anchor gratefulness in something bigger and more dependable: God's abundance. In trusting God, we are freed from anxiety and worry to embrace gratitude and joy, no matter the circumstances of our lives.

Paul's advice to the Colossian in the first reading, urges the people to put on a thankful attitude as one would put on one's clothes, an attitude of gratitude clearly visible in our compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness of one another, in other words, a normal, attitude-adjusting "uplift" each day, based not on our circumstances but on the Word of God dwelling in you and I richly. The Gospel reading encourages focus on God's lavish provision – which itself gives reason for thankfulness – instead of fleeting concerns that tend toward consuming our energies. Together the readings encourage thankful prayer to God no matter the political climate, our prospects for economic betterment, or our personal level of anxiety. Paul's words elsewhere crystalize this overarching theme: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:18).

Giving thanks is not rocket science. But it has power to move us from fear and worry (focused on anxieties) to faith (focused on God's reign). Our world offers abundant reason for fear and worry, threatening to paralyze us spiritually, ethically, and vocationally. The response of faith, however, puts our potential anxieties into perspective, focusing instead on God who promises to provide lavishly for our needs. Fear says, "I don't have enough," while faith says, "God is my provider; I have all I need." Faith begets thanksgiving, and thanksgiving fosters a countercultural perspective that says, "All these things will be given as well" (Matt 6:33). As people of faith, we are called to be a people of thanksgiving – a people marked by gratefulness or 'eucharistia,' Greek for thanksgiving, a simple meal of deep significance we celebrate each week at Church, the eucharist, a thanksgiving meal seen so clearly in Jesus' example of giving himself symbolized in bread and wine. Not only does thanksgiving stem from our faith; it begets joy and generosity.

Even if your faith in God is shaky, wishful thinking or non-existent, God can make things happen you might not otherwise believe. Listen to the story of Crystal. From the age of three Crystal suffered abuse from her mother's boyfriend. So much was taken from her, personal dignity, sense of own worth, her childhood innocence, a sense of her own soul. Believing in God was something she desperately wanted and needed, given the challenges of her life but she felt believing in God was never going to happen. How could a good God allow to happen what happened to her? She felt such guilt having had an abortion as a teenager. How could she believe in God? Until one Thanksgiving.

As Crystal McVea writes in her book *Waking up in Heaven*, "The place where God finally tracked me down wasn't a church or a school or a hospital. It was a Pizza Hut."

Crystal and her daughter had a coupon for a small pizza and Crystal ordered a diet coke. When the sweet, elderly waitress brought over the bill it was for \$1.00 Not a bad deal. But when she handed the bill to her, she felt a nudge. She calls it a nudge because she didn't know what else to call it. It was more like an insistent thought. No voice in her head or anything, just a thought, like in the movie Ghost when Whoopi Goldberg gets annoyed when Patrick Swayze, who is dead, keeps trying to get her to communicate through Whoopi to his grieving widow Demi Moore. And the thought Crystal had was, "Give the waitress a \$100 tip." This message, "Give a \$100 tip," just wouldn't stop. \$100 tip on a \$1.00 bill, for a diet coke???

One hundred dollars was an absolute fortune to her and her husband but the nudge was getting stronger and she felt overwhelmed. She called her husband at work. "That's God" he said calmly. "Do what he's asking. I gotta go, babe."

There was just no way she was going to leave \$100. Then the thought came in her head, "Okay, then leave \$50." The nudge, it seemed, was flexible. She went to the table and left a \$10 tip and felt that even THAT was too much.

But when she got in her car, the nudging only got worse. Whatever it was, it was not going away. She called her husband again and he said that he was in a meeting and really can't talk. "Go to the ATM and take out the other \$40 and take it to her. Bye."

Her husband knew as well as Crystal that they didn't have much extra money. While it seemed like lunacy to Crystal, to her husband it was God's money, God's nudging and their job was to act on it. Crystal didn't believe in God, but went ahead to the ATM anyway and withdrew \$40.

Yet another insistent thought pushed through her brain. "Tell her who it is from." Crystal felt like she was losing her mind. She was arguing with herself all the way back to the Pizza Hut. She took a deep breath and said, "Okay, let's get this over with." "Hi," she said to the waitress, "I gave you a tip earlier but it wasn't the right amount." The waitress dug into her apron and tried to give Crystal back the \$10 bill. "No, no that's not it. I gave you too little." Then she handed her the \$40 and said, "God asked me to give this to you."

She looked shocked and said, "What?" "God asked me to give this to you," feeling her face grow flush, the colour of tomato sauce. The waitress looked at the money in her hands and seemed completely stunned. Finally, after a few seconds she screamed, "Oh my God."

"Yes, exactly," said Crystal

Three days later, her husband gave Crystal a call. "You need to sit down," he said. Oh great Crystal thought, he's lost his job and I just gave away \$50.

Hubby says, "I happened to walk in on a conversation with the guy who manages the Pizza Hut. He was talking about this lady who came in and gave a waitress a fifty dollar tip. The waitress' husband had just lost his job and they couldn't afford to have their two children join them for thanksgiving. So, the waitress prayed to God to somehow let her earn \$100 she needed on her last shift. By the end of the shift, she'd only earned \$50. Then her last customer walked in, ordered a small pizza and diet coke with

a coupon and gave the waitress a \$50 tip. Because of that tip, she could now have her kids home for thanksgiving.

There was no way this was a coincidence. "God," Crystal writes, "you have to be real. There's no other explanation." However, whatever sureness she felt slowly faded away. She couldn't convince herself that God worked that way – by nudging people in Pizza Huts. Wasn't it just an annoying circumstance? If you read the book *Waking up in Heaven* by Crystal McVea you can read the whole story. Amazing how God works!

Keep your eyes open, Jesus says. Look at the birds. Gaze across the fields, harvested now, having delivered the fullness of the year. Drink it all in and know: despite all that weighs on your heart, we still live in a world of lavish grace. So, keep your eyes and heart open. You never know when joy and thanks will fill you.

Yesterday morning I asked and received permission from the men attending our online bible study to share very briefly their stories of how they came to believe in God, as a testimony, as something to be thankful for. The stories range from the dramatic to everyday life.

After years of depression and a difficult life, Joseph said he was thinking of suicide one day when it was raining. He looked out the window and saw a drop of rain on a leaf. In that moment Joseph heard in his spirit these words, "the raindrops are my tears I have shed for you, Joseph. Why harm yourself when I love you?"

Another man, Esrick said he should have been killed in a traffic accident in Texas on a stormy day when someone's trailer came unattached and smashed into his car, he woke up in the hospital and was so thankful he was alive that he confirmed his faith in God; it still gives Esrick goosebumps to talk about it.

Or Peter when a huge truck tire came careening down the highway and should have smashed his front window killing him, but it didn't and Peter felt blessed to be safe and affirmed his faith once again in an awesome God,

Or Barry, during an earthquake when he was a teenager at boarding school in Jamaica, when the drill for each class was to head quickly and orderly outside, only to discover the very ground they were standing on was shaking and at that very moment Barry gave his life to Christ along with several other boys who began a bible study right afterward.

Or Brian who can trace no single event but has grown to believe in God with confidence, reinforced by his 5 yr old granddaughter Meesha who has a depth of faith in Jesus that inspires him and Brian's family, including his wife Rev Catherine.

Or Doug who has felt close to God especially now as he and his wife Fran are expecting their second grandchild, as their son Adam and his wife Vicky are expecting any day.

What's your story? Despite what life throws you, what you are thankful for? Where is God in your life?

This weekend we celebrate Thanksgiving. It gives us the opportunity to give thanks to God for all the blessings in our lives, the small and the large ones that remind us that all life comes from our Creator.

Take some time to be still and pay attention to your neighbours, your family members, your co-workers – people we so often just take for granted – and show them your gratitude, your care and your concern. Ask after those you haven't seen in a while, bring them to mind in prayer and find out how they are doing.

Write a note of gratitude to someone you care about and who cares for you. Connect. Together is Better. Thankfulness is not an act of defiance or a sentimental stance; thankfulness is asserting confidence, not in circumstances that beset us, but a God who loves us. Montreal Canadiens' star goal tender Carey Price who has stepped back from playing at the beginning of the NHL season to seek help, has a Bible quote stitched inside his blocker glove, Philippians 4.13, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

A man name David was feeling well for the first time in weeks. Amid his reverie, he was startled by a prayer that he didn't ask for, he didn't want and didn't see coming. "Thanks for cancer," he whispered and about the recent diagnosis, "If I have to struggle with this," he prayed, "let it help someone."

It was a crazy and insensitive. God doesn't cause cancer or will anyone's cancer. Everything Jesus reveals about God's compassion suggests the very opposite. Cancer, like so many diseases, is a scourge, withering and wasting millions of people, including our beloved ones, in pain and premature deaths.

David Miller who writes this reflection, said, "my unsolicited gratitude was not really for cancer itself, but for the way it had opened my eyes and heart to signs of God's loving presence. It was the Spirit's bone-deep cry of thanks for this communion, this oneness with God that evaporates every ounce of anxiety and uncertainty about God's great love for everything and everyone. Thankfulness, he writes, is a way of life, that awakens trust and stills anxiety.

Thanksgiving calls us beyond contentment to seek God's kingdom and righteousness by forgiving freely and blessing without partiality, even as God makes sun to shine and rain to fall on the good and the evil, alike. Wholehearted generosity spills from our hearts because we are lavishly loved by God.

Thank God because he never lets us go! Thank God because he never leaves us nor forsakes us! Thank God "for his wonderful works to humankind."

An African American tradition goes: “God has been good to me. I won’t complain. I can’t complain because God cares so much for me that he lifted me up out of the miry clay. He planted my feet on the rock to stay. That is the reason why I thank God and sing and shout because God came down and lifted me up! God delivers. God saves. God loves forever! Thank God for his steadfast love! God came down and lifted me up!”

I wonder what’s been your experience of being nudged by God. Let me know in the comments, by email to [office@christchurchoshawa.ca](mailto:office@christchurchoshawa.ca) I love hearing stories like that.

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