

The Grateful Heart
Thanksgiving for Ann's Ministry: 1985-2010

A sermon given November 21, 2010, by T. Gregory Turner for the celebration of Ann Poling Hawkins' twenty-five years of service as Administrator of First Congregational Church of Corvallis, Oregon

What a joy to be with you this special morning: Thanksgiving Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian liturgical year – and, of course, this large and happy gathering of appreciation. Thank you, Liz, for the invitation. It is a treat to be standing where some of my greatest verbal follies were committed and, to be sure, some of your finest acts of patience and toleration.

In thinking about what I wanted to say fit for this day, it occurred that if Martin Luther was right, and “gratitude is the basic Christian attitude,” then Thanksgiving for us is the basic holiday. Only with hearts open to gratefulness can we understand, not to mention appreciate, those other special markers of our faith's journey: Christmas surely, Easter even more; and more personal, the birth of child, a graduation or two, the meaning of vocation and career, the death of a parent or spouse or our own death, and the promise of life lived at an eternal dimension. That is to say, our story is shaped by the qualities of a grateful heart or it isn't, and to the extent it isn't, life is less than it might be. This marker of who we are shows that gratitude is a primary road to relationship with God; as if by thankfulness we are grafted as branches into the vine of Christ, become rooted in holy soil, learn to soar as eagles, or whatever spiritual image you have in mind.

Therefore, isn't it a happy coincidence in this great place that Thanksgiving 2010 lifts up for us the reminder that 25 years ago Ann Poling Hawkins, child of this congregation, became the first voice we hear when we call or face we see when we visit the church office. For it is gratitude that best marks this celebration today, as our minds quickly click back and back to this communication, or that bit of information, or the other phone call or email to meet a need, to some special event, or more likely a routine procedure or detail handled or pastoral contact made – and many more of all of those – that would not have happened at First Congregational were it not for her.

So it is Gratitude that comes to mind: gratitude....and surprise. For almost everyone here it's no surprise, but for Ann – well, maybe your long conspiracy has worked. It would be startling if that were the case. As I mentioned to a couple of you earlier, and wrote to Ann in a note she will soon receive, if you actually did keep this surprise from her, I will be forced to reexamine my position on miracles.

Joy is often our very human reaction to surprise, perhaps the first quality of a grateful heart. One of my favorite surprise stories comes from India where a hat seller, on waking from a nap under a tree, found that a group of monkeys had taken all his hats to the top of the tree. In exasperation he took off his own hat and flung it to the ground. The monkeys, known for their imitative urge, hurled down the hats, which the hat seller joyfully... and promptly... collected. Half a century later his grandson, also a hat seller, set down his wares under the same tree for a nap. On waking, he was dismayed to discover that monkeys had taken all his hats to the treetop. Then he remembered his grandfather's story, so he threw his own hat to the ground. But, mysteriously,

none of the monkeys threw any hats, and only one monkey came down. It took the hat on the ground firmly in hand, walked up to the hat seller, gave him a slap and said, “You think you’re the only one around here with a grandfather?”

I was reminded of that story because around here, as you know, if you want a bit of memory tweaked, of history recalled as a helpmate to present and future possibilities, you are well advised to ask Ann first. Because whose roots go deeper here than hers? She knows our history, the stories of the people who have made that history and probably their connections to most everyone else. She hopes that history will inform but not control, and she cares deeply for the people who are this church. Whose memory is less likely to be surprised about anything that happens here than Ann’s? And yet, watching her today, I think you may have pulled it off.

Well, I hope it was a surprise, for that too is essential. Yogi Berra was asked by his wife: “If you die before I do, where would you like me to bury you?” And he answered: “Surprise me.” I think it was Francois Sagan who said that “Art, to be art, must take reality by surprise.” And I know it was Leo Buscaglia who wrote so well: “Love withers with predictability; its very essence is surprise and amazement.” So Ann, we hope you are surprised. And if you are, then we are amazed.

But what amazes me the most, I suppose, is the deep human compulsion to move heaven and earth on such occasions so as to insure that gratitude is expressed at all. This party we are throwing ought not be a surprise when we think about it. The grateful heart will strive to express itself – and in a variety of ways. Sometimes the forms are outward symbols of an inward inclination, a joy quietly expressed; something as routine, for example, as pausing at the end of a the day to recall with gratitude some happy occurrence; or a note of appreciation written to one who did you a favor; or the blessing returned at meals or bedtime – interesting old-fashioned word there: “returned,” as if we were giving back something first offered to us. Such habitual blessings affirm God’s bounty, remind of what it is we profess, connect us to each other; and all of these when practiced literally end up molding the heart.

At a less personal level, when thanksgiving is offered at a larger dinner party or at a banquet, dimensions are added to what is experienced at home. Because so many varieties of thinking, feeling and believing may be represented at the tables, if the prayer reflects something true of the one called upon to speak, it can become a stimulator of thought and discussion, even edification, later on. No genuine prayer of thanks, it seems to me, ought ever to be taken lightly; as if no more serious than saying, “Pass the peas, please.” Someone may be moved in ways we never know. Adding the outward practice of giving thanks to the inward joy of gratitude makes Thanksgiving a habit of the heart.

Joy and Habit combined in a story my father told of a banquet where he was the speaker. The chairman of the occasion opened with the following prayer before the meal: “Eternal God, Thanks. Amen.” That was it. Taking a generous interpretation of the moment, Dad wrote that the chairman had thereby left it up to the diners to spell out what it might be for each one to offer thanks. And for sure the prayer created some discussion at the tables. Following the meeting one of the chairman’s friends, probably with a twinkle in her eye, asked him: “Fred, how did you ever find the time to prepare?” But others, giving him the benefit of doubt, thought he had

captured at least one essence of gratitude: the thoughtfulness of brevity.

The point is that what we do habitually in spoken or written words of thanks for a gift extended or a kindness done can be an outward sign of a grateful heart. Now I realize that habit is by definition predictable, precisely what I was arguing against just moments ago. But saying thank you, offering a heartfelt appreciation, is rarer than it should be and almost invariably is a pleasant, if gentle, surprise to those who receive our good words – our benedictions. “Thanks is just a little word/ No bigger than a minute/ But there’s a world of meaning/ and appreciation in it.” Just because it is so little a thing, of course, is it often overlooked or even considered unimportant.

But by building into our routines those moments when we pause to offer thanks, no matter how mechanical it may feel at times, means we have not forgotten it is every bit as important to acknowledge a gift and it is to bestow one. So we pause, Ann, to say “Thanks.”

Those of us who are parents, involved grandparents or godparents, or attentive aunts or uncles have experienced, I hope, the training of children to express thankfulness for the benefits that come their way. Robert Louis Stevenson had such parents, and he repaid the debt with a marvelous story. He tells of a vagabond traveler in France who slept so well one night out under the stars, supported by soft and warm earth, that in the morning, out of gratitude, he emptied the coins from his purse upon the ground in payment for the natural hospitality he had received.

Psalm 65 put it this way: *Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion... You crown the year with bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, [and] they shout and sing together for joy.* Or more familiar, Psalm 100 read this morning bids us: *Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness... Enter the gates with thanksgiving, the courts with praise. Give thanks to God and bless God’s holy name.* Or Psalm 103: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God’s benefits.*

Jesus is often seen to be offering thanks, and Paul’s letters normally – unless he is really angry – include a strong opening or closing word of thanksgiving for the people he is writing. Then there is Timothy, where one of Paul’s disciple’s writes: *For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.* Eugene Peterson adds: *Nothing is to be sneered at and thrown out.* Joy and Habit, Habit and Joy – a grateful heart being both surprisingly fresh and predictably reliable.

Now, all this talk of gratitude is, I know, only that: talk coming from one who has been extraordinarily blessed by others with relatively little effort from himself. Easy for you, you might tell me, for a person who had wonderful parents, attentive teachers, and automatic cultural breaks along the way; for one who has always had a job, never went hungry, always had a roof over his head, and was never abused – except by a couple church search committees. So what else is there by which we mark a grateful heart?

There is a strong hint in the 2nd chapter of Philippians, where we read that Jesus, though by his

very nature God, humbled himself to become a servant of all, as if being divine, rather than elevating us, instead connects us in love. “The whole idea of compassion,” says Thomas Merton, “is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all...living beings, all part of one another, and all involved in one another.” With the benefits for which we have every reason to offer thanks, the grateful heart thus brings with it a full measure of justice and the concern for those who, for whatever reason, seem shut out of the storehouse of good fortune.

My local church has twice been the host for the Nickelsville homeless encampment in Seattle – which meant, of course, that we played a small part in making sure that fine community had a home: not a house, but a home. On Veterans’ Day a week ago Thursday, because so many of our home-less are veterans, a service of remembrance was held at St. James Cathedral to honor the 54 people who died without shelter on Seattle’s streets so far this year. The homeless and hungry, the ill of mind or body, the bypassed, repressed and oppressed – sufferings brought on by too little understanding of the need for thanksgiving – are carried within any genuinely grateful heart. For the giver of thanks, having seen want, will first reach to help before he calculates blame. Justice and thanksgiving are so linked as to be twins. Frederick Buechner wrote that, “Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” As we know, if you want peace you will work for justice. And as we also know, if there is to be peace on earth it has to begin with me.

At which point God seems to hand a portion of the reins to us. It turns out that gratitude is a two-way street. As we offer thanks for what has been bestowed on us, we also hear God’s call that, therefore, there is much we can do; which is surely why Ann and John are so involved beyond the congregation with ministries of peace and justice. They know there are ways to share that not only relieve sufferings of mind or body, but also address the conditions that produce the pain. Charity is a fine and necessary virtue so long as it moves us to see, and then overcome, the conditions that call for our charity in the first place. The best way to make glad the heart of God through our thanksgiving is to do something for one of God’s other children.

So, friends, these are a few of the feelings that emerge for me, maybe for you too, when we think of the ministry Ann has offered this past quarter century. She has helped us to realize that in feeling the joy of true thanksgiving, in training the habits of the heart with gratefulness, and in focusing our gratitude through acts of compassion and justice toward others, we come closer to God. Let us pray with the poet:*

I do not thank Thee, Lord That I have
bread to eat while others starve;
Nor yet for work to do
While empty hands solicit heaven;
Nor for a body strong
While other bodies flatten beds of pain.
No, for these I do not give thanks!

But I am grateful, Lord,
Because my meager loaf I may divide:
For that my busy hands
May move to meet another’s need;
Because my doubled strength
I may expend to steady one who faints.
Yes, for all these I do give thanks!

For heart to share, desire to bear
And will to lift.
Flamed into one deathless love
Thanks be to God for this!
Unspeakable! God's gift

Amen

*The poet is Janie Alford, 1887-1986, from Tennessee,
who grew up a conservative Presbyterian but lived long
enough to become a liberal one.