“Grateful for the Unknown”

Rev. David Gregory

November 11, 2018
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

First reading
Diana Butler Bass in Grateful

Gratitude, at its deepest and perhaps most transformative level, is not warm feelings about what we have. Instead, gratitude is the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, that we are, that in the multibillion-year history of the universe each one of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness, and has a story. Life is the gift. When that mystery fills our hearts, it overwhelms us and a deep river of emotions flows forth – feelings we barely knew we were capable of holding.

Second reading
2 Corinthians 9:8-11
from The Message by Eugene Peterson

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,

   He throws caution to the winds,
   giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
   His right-living, right-giving ways
   never run out, never wear out.

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that he becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.
Like most of you, over the last several days we have been following the harrowing stories of the wildfires burning across our state, especially the huge and deadly one that has wiped the town of Paradise off the map. Accounts of the survivors fill our hearts with gratitude, just as the silence of those who are missing fills us with dread. From the east coast come the text messages asking if we are all right. While the quality of our air is of great concern, I tell them, I would not trade this problem for those up north, or in the southern part of the state as well. We are grateful. Always cautious, deeply concerned, and deeply grateful. It is a timely lesson as we enter into the season of Thanksgiving. And it has sent me back to the work of author and church historian Diana Butler Bass, particularly her latest work which is entitled,\textit{ Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks.}

Here at the Community Congregational Church we have the communal spiritual practice of gratitude. Each week when we gather in this place, I ask you to freely share those things for which you are grateful. It is important for us to know that this is not a mere formality in public services. It is not something we do in order to fill the time. It is our core activity as human beings, one that opens our spirits not just for the purpose of giving, but also for receiving. With each and every breath, the exhale makes room and prepares us for the inhale. Gratitude is how we inhale. Generosity is how we exhale. Unlike the beating of our hearts, which is strictly involuntary, our breathing—which has an involuntary impulse—can also be done mindfully.

Gratitude and Giving also contain an involuntary impulse. When someone gives me a gift, I am often prompted to respond in kind. When gifted with love, I am prompted to love in return. But gratitude and generosity as spiritual practices also require our sense of mindfulness in order to become more fully developed. Gratitude is a well, fed by ever-deepening streams in which we store the water of life, and generosity is the flow from that well, the beautiful exhale that says to the world around us “We are here, we are together, we are connected, and we feel your pain.”

Each week on Tuesday evening, at the rehearsals for Singers Marin, I sit in the bass section next to a gentleman who lost his home in the Santa Rosa fire last year. Though the rebuilding is nearing completion, I look at him and think about what it would be like to lose our home and escape with our lives. It would certainly peel away the bulk of our material attachments and forever shift our priorities, both major and minor. In turn, I believe it would make us grateful. Gratitude, when it moves beyond warm feelings about what we have, eventually grows into the ability to hold those things more loosely, to release our grip on the pieces of our lives that are merely on loan to us anyway. Gratitude is the ability to hold everything we have with an open hand, and to understand that it could be gone in an instant, and then to be at peace with that fact.
Dr. Joe Dispenza, author of *Becoming Supernatural*, often says that “gratitude is the ultimate state of receivership.” In other words, in this practice of breathing, gratitude and generosity are what make room for the flow, and change us from people who are addicted to our own scarcity and want, into people who are channels of abundance. Once I view this deeply spiritual practice as a means of getting rich, I will have missed the point. The open flow of spirit can indeed result in a life where our needs are met, but it isn’t magic.

I have observed people I consider to be wealthy, some of whom are among the most lovingly generous people on earth. There are also greedy hoarders of wealth, driven by scarcity and fear to hold on more tightly than ever. I know people who have very little, who are among the most lovingly generous people on earth, and others who are driven by scarcity and fear to hold on more tightly than ever. The difference isn’t in what they have. The difference is in how they hold what they have. It’s whether they are holding their breath until they turn blue and gasp for more, or if they are simply breathing consciously and deeply into a body that is restful and receptive, knowing that it has what it needs.

It was in the New Testament letter to the church in Philippi that the Apostle Paul is represented to have expressed this kind of gratitude as he acknowledges their monetary gift. He assures them that he knows how to live with plenty and with little, and that this ability has little or nothing to do with what he has. It has to do with his ability to be content. One of the great values of these writings that were collected into the New Testament is that they provide us a glimpse of what can happen when people truly love and care for one another, practicing the art of gratitude and generosity. This was a time of fear and violence in the world, a world with no social safety net for the people other than their chosen communities. This is one of the reasons that the words of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles, so frequently mention the care of the poor, the widows, and the orphans. There was no one else who could care for them. And so these gatherings of “people of the way” that sprang up throughout the Roman empire became models of what loving people do, in contrast to the harsh, bitter, greedy culture around them. They found it impossible to love without meeting the real needs of those around them.

And so, as we press on through our own season of stewardship and giving in this church, the question of how much you will give to the work of this ministry in the coming year is not so much a negotiation about the support of a church bureaucracy, which we may or may not view with some suspicion. Instead, it really has to do with breathing our way into becoming “people of the way.” It is about the kind of gratitude that says, “We are grateful just to be here, experiencing the pile of blessings that we have in community,” and the drinking in of all that gratitude leads us to an exhale of generosity, because we want others to feel blessed in community as well. It’s why we’re here now. It’s why we’ll be here next year, and in the next decade, and beyond. Freely we have received; breathe in. Freely let us give; breathe out.

May it be so. Amen.