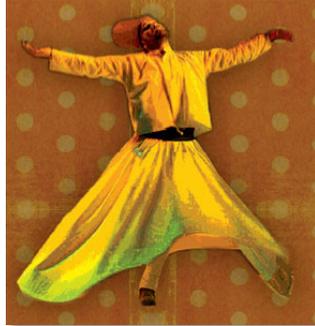


## **“The Inevitable Reply”**

Rev. David Gregory

November 24, 2019

Thanksgiving Sunday



### **First Reading**

Toko-pa Turner in *Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home*

Gratefulness is the sun around which all other practices revolve. When you are genuinely attentive to life, gratefulness is the inevitable reply to all the things conspiring to endow you with their beauty and intricate genius. By showing up for the generosity of life, even in its left-handed forms, we are declaring our worthiness to it. When we allow the privilege of being alive to really penetrate us, we are participating in the holy moment of life’s becoming. Gratefulness is the recognition of our belonging to that dance.

### **Second Reading**

Psalm 65:9-13 New Revised Standard Version

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

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This is one of those moments each year when we are likely to notice how quickly a year passes. Another Thanksgiving feast; another celebration of bounty; another trip around the sun. We have begun the inevitable slide of holidays that will deposit us into an entirely new year. If you’re like me, the Thanksgiving holiday carries you back over decades of memories—some better than others—of family traditions—some better than others—of spirited conversations—some better than others—around a table stacked with plentiful food, festive drink, and hopefully a moment or two to express our gratitude for the blessings of life.

In our spiritual community, we have a consistent practice, each time we gather, of expressing our gratitude out loud. We approach it with intention and by design, because it creates a ground of positive energy from which we can be nourished, and from which we can draw when it comes time to express our deepest, most profound concerns. Prayers that are long on asking and short on thanking seem whiny, self-centered, and hollow. Much has been spoken about the Apostle Paul's admonition to give thanks "in everything." As I mentioned in a blog post this week, there is a sugary version of it that I just don't buy. When someone tries just a little too hard or moves too quickly into "Everything happens for a reason; every cloud has a silver lining" mode, I get a little suspicious. Really? You're grateful for THAT? Really?

Several months ago, my spiritual director read a poem to me, and I wondered how I had missed it before. It had such a profound effect on me that I read it here the following Sunday. From that moment, a translation of Rumi's "The Guest House" became one of my sacred scriptures, because it addressed something that had been eluding me for my entire life. What do we do with the bad stuff that comes our way? It's the question that people in my line of work are asked most often, and it usually happens in a waiting room, a mortuary, or sometimes in the pastor's study. I'm not sure that Rumi's poem is meant to answer it exactly, but for the first time in my life there was some synaptic connection around it that started to make sense.

In the months since that introduction, the poem has continued to show up, just about every time I turn around. As always, the synchronicities are rather astounding. The latest one is a book entitled, *Belonging*, by a dream-worker and brilliant writer named Toko-pa Turner. There are a number of us in this community who have been reading it, thanks to Jennifer Stone, whose excitement for it has been infectious in a really good way. Turner shares Rumi's poem in a section on gratitude, which she describes as "the sun around which all other practices revolve," as the "inevitable reply to all the things conspiring to endow you with their beauty and intricate genius." "Gratefulness," she says, "is the recognition of our belonging" to a dance, or "the holy moment of life's becoming." These are not phrases that fit into any shallow sentiment around a holiday table. Try reading "The Guest House" for your relatives while the turkey gets cold, and they'll probably pour you a little more wine. This isn't easy stuff. It's not fluffy and sweet. It's in the category of "Do we have to talk about that NOW?" Can't we just enjoy the moment? It occurred to me this week that much of our practice of gratitude is legitimate, genuine, and well-meaning, but it is often limited to the realm of positive thinking, omitting all of the other things that show up on our doorstep, like a depression or a meanness. We are being encouraged by the poet to "welcome and entertain them all."

Like many of you, during the last three years I've been living with an angst, a constant low-grade anxiety over the state of world affairs and public discourse. I can scarcely believe the latest outrage on any given day. The meanness of it is offensive to the deepest reaches of my soul. There have been times I've tried to spin it, and that is not to say I do not believe that some really good things are growing out of our current situation. But as I contemplate thankfulness on a day like this, the thought of including any of this on my guest list defies my emotions. To welcome and entertain any of it is a tall order.

There are some people who come to the door that you let in for a time so that they can say their piece. You might smile at them and say, "Sorry you can't stay longer," as you invite them to take their leave. During my childhood, this category included the Jehovah's Witness, the Avon lady, and even our own preacher, any of whom might show up unannounced whenever my mother's hair was in curlers. She was far too polite to refuse them entry, but neither was she going to throw them a party. *Thank you for coming. You're now invited to leave.* In Rumi's world, the preacher, the Avon lady, and even the Jehovah's Witness may have been sent as a "guide from beyond, to clear us out for some new delight." The real temptation is to slam the door shut and hope that they all go away. But they won't. Injustice, greed, and hatred don't ever seem to read the sign that says "No Solicitors." The only true way to handle them is to invite them across the threshold for a cup of tea, with the full understanding that the welcome has a brief shelf-life. *There now, I've heard you. Thank you for sharing. Kindly leave now.*

The human family is being called upon by many, many guests, both welcome and unwelcome, giving us the opportunity to learn the art of gratitude. Like an atrophied muscle that must be reignited and re-introduced to the rest of your body, this art of gratitude is one that must be exercised. It hurts at first. It is easier not to do it. We'd rather someone do it for us. It doesn't feel natural to us, but the more we allow it, the more healing can take place.

So this Thanksgiving, we pause to give thanks for blessings of home and hearth and harvest, and also for a world that is none too rosy at the moment. The result will be that instead of cowering within the thick armor of our fears, we will stand in the present moment with a strong measure of grace, ready to live in the world that *is*, rooted and grounded in a way that leaves our joy intact. The problems may not leave us, but we will realize that this was never the goal in the first place. And standing in the present will enable us to join the dance of gratitude and have the happiest of Thanksgivings.

