

Why Do We Pray: Giving Thanks
Psalm 100 & Philippians 4:4-7
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It's always interesting to me when old stories find their way back to social media. One of those resurfaced again this week. It was the story of the gratitude of Edward Reis. I first saw it five years ago. It is just as poignant today...

Edward Reis died in April of 2014. He had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis 6 years before at the age of 56. A healthy, outdoorsy Park Ranger with the national park's service, Reis suffered greatly as his body refused to do what he wanted it to do, and as he was forced to retreat indoors, out of the woods that gave him life. Reis had always been a person who reveled in nature...and he was so thankful he had found a calling that placed him there almost all the time.

But by the fall of 2013, it had been a long time since Reis had seen much more of nature than the front porch of the Evergreen Health Hospice in Edmonds, Washington where he lived his final years. But he shared his great hope with the chaplain there...a hope to one last time spend time in the woods...and that chaplain, Curt Huber, mentioned it to the chaplain of a local volunteer firefighting station....and within a few weeks....the EMT's and a hospice nurse and chaplain Huber were guiding a gurney with Edward Reis comfortably, but safely strapped in, down the hiking paths of Meadowdale Beach Park....for three hours....they would stop and let him listen to the birds, or pick up a piece of bark or a leaf and let him just breathe in the air and smells that had been such a source of joy for him....

Over and over again throughout the three hours, Reis would softly say...I'm so happy...thank you...thank you....

And Chaplain Huber would later say that the overarching feeling of everyone who was there that day...was a deeply spiritual sense of gratitude. Reis' gratitude at being home again in the nature he loved...and everyone else there, giving of their gifts and abilities to make his joy possible...there was only gratitude...deep, deep, gratitude.

Today we begin a four week series on Why We Pray....Now, don't expect us to fully answer that question with 4 sermons, because there are almost as many reasons why we pray as there are people who pray....that's the nature of priesthood of the believer....but I wanted to start with prayers of gratitude, in part because they are both very common and often, I believe, misunderstood.

Let's start with a fairly basic question....why gratitude? What's so important about gratitude?

It was Nietzsche who said, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1955, p. 139.) that "One who fights monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

In the Us v. Them world in which we increasingly live, where we so often turn those we disagree with, or those we think are doing grievous harm to our community or our nation, into monsters, we would be wise to heed Nietzsche's advice. How easy it becomes to demonize others without noticing that every time we do that, we perhaps have to comb our hair a bit differently to hide the horns that are growing there.

I want to suggest that one of the main ways we avoid becoming monsters is if we begin from a place of gratitude. If our encounter with the world is built on a foundation of gratitude for the day we have, the life we have been given today....and not what the world will throw at us today...or what we can achieve today....but the very simple gratitude that this is another day we get to live. I believe it is the cornerstone on which the life of a disciple....or the life of a person who doesn't live an endlessly anxious life if you don't like that churchy word, is built...

Why? First, because being grateful is demonstrably good for us. In his book, *The Upward Spiral*, neuroscientist Dr. Alex Kolb says....

"...there's a gratitude circuit in your brain, badly in need of a workout. Strengthening that circuit brings the power to elevate your physical and mental health, boost happiness, improve sleep, and help you feel more connected to other people."

The number of studies about the positive power of gratitude on the human psyche and body are mind-boggling...

A recent article published at the Wharton School of Health Care Management (https://www.whartonhealthcare.org/discovering_the_health) collected some of those studies from a number of academic journals. They cited studies that show that gratitude reduces stress-related cortisol levels in the body by 23% and increases the healthy hormone DHEA by up to 100%. It improves the quality of sleep according to another study, increases emotional well-being in another, and makes your heart stronger and healthier according to another. Another Wharton study shows that it also makes one a more motivational leader.

So gratitude, and presumably prayers of gratitude, are good for our mind and body....

But I want to suggest that even more importantly, they are good for our entire being....

If we begin from a place of gratitude, we begin...as does the psalmist in Psalm 100, by looking at the world through a lens other than it being about me...about you....

The Psalmist chooses to look at all of creation...not as something created for him...but something created by God in an act of love and faithfulness to creation itself. The joyful celebration of the Psalmist begins with the understanding that the psalmist and we are not the masters of the universe...we are creature...not just that we are creature-capable of looking beyond our creaturehood to the possibility....that something greater than us brought all of this into being...

In our tradition we call that something the Triune God....but in our gratitude for being created, for being placed in this place and this time, we share a common gratitude with many other religions...particularly those that have stood the test of time...

Being one creature among billions could be seen as being insignificant...but being a unique creature among billions...surely that alone is remarkable enough to inspire awe and gratitude....if we stop and think about it...

And that's the second reason gratitude is important for our entire being...When we stop and think...when we take the time to set aside the very important issues of the moment....to see the bigger picture...to look for

the things we have to be grateful for and about...it's one more step away from a narcissistic approach to life...

It's so easy today to get caught up in what we do, in our daily tasks, in our lists of things that need to be accomplished, our lists of things that must be done BY US...that we so easily forget all that has been done that we had nothing to do with...the big things like...the sun came up today and gravity and the earth's rotation still kept an atmosphere clinging to earth so we can breathe...and little things like....the newspaper delivery person made sure the paper was at the front door and not in the muddy grass by the curb.

Taking the time to look...taking the time to see what we have been given...what God and others have done...it's the ultimate invitation to say thank you....in our words, our actions, and our prayers....

But don't get me wrong...I'm not advocating a pie in the sky...always and only see the good stuff approach to life...that's not real...and it's insulting to those who are experiencing oppression, pain and strife.

Religion columnist and progressive Christian activist John Pavlovitz reminded us this week that being endlessly positive is deeply privileged behavior...as he put it:

"Many people don't have the option of avoiding negativity today.

They don't have the privilege of not coming off as combative.

They don't have the luxury of *not* fighting.

They can't decide not to live with urgency in this day, because there is no other way to live in order to survive it."

I would add to John's words that one need not be endlessly positive to be grateful.

Edward Reis didn't ignore his suffering as he was carried along those hiking paths in Washington 5 years ago...he couldn't...but he also didn't let that suffering close him off from experiencing joy...close him off from a moment of spiritual gratitude.

I'm no neuroscientist like Dr. Kolb, but the way I see it....there is a place in the brain....and it can be a gratitude center....or it can be a self-satisfaction center....It can be a place where I experience thanksgiving for what I have...or a place where I can be self-congratulatory about what I have done.

I don't think those two things can exist together. I don't think I can be puffed up and destructively proud about how important I am in the world....if I first start with being grateful. The gratitude pushes that me, me, me stuff off the table like a friend's cat pushes wine glasses off any surface she sees....They simply can't be in the same place at the same time.

To pray is to seek relationship with something greater than ourselves...it opens us to wonder and respect and....one hopes....gratitude.

Giving thanks, being changed by the loving actions of another...these are ways in which I believe we bear the image of God....

And our prayers of gratitude, our prayers of thanksgiving...Paul says they free us from fear...and free us for Shalom....the peace that passes understanding. He says they guard our hearts...

Isn't that an interesting turn of a phrase...gratitude....particularly a prayerful attitude of gratitude, guards our hearts....maybe because gratitude takes us close to the heart of God to see who we really are...the beloved of God, the creature unlike any other made to live in harmony with all others...and when we are in that place...whatever may come....illness, cruelty, oppression, injustice....none can rob us of that core piece of identity...that same core that will inspire us to join together in love to overcome cruelty, oppression and injustice and to face illness with hope for wholeness and peace....

Maybe there is something there about patriotism and gratitude for our country as well...even if much of what is happening makes us fearful. Or angry or scared...the founding principles...the idea that we are equal under the law and entitled to our say, but no more say than any other person....that core...we can be thankful for that, grateful for it...and that gratitude can inspire us to seek once again the better angels of our nature...

Maybe that's actually true about almost every aspect of life...if we find the core idea that inspires our gratitude...that then motivates our actions to seek the best outcome for all.

That's what Calvin was talking about when he said we awaken to faith by the action of the Holy Spirit, I think....We discover the core truth....we are loved by a God who would live and die and conquer death just so we would know we are not enslaved to sin and death....and our gratitude for that love, for that grace, inspires our loving actions to the world....our service to those in

need, our work to transform oppressive systems so that all might live with dignity, peace, and joy and find their true callings....it all begins with gratitude for what is most basic, most simple about who we believe God to be, and who we believe we are made to be....

There is much we have yet to say and learn about prayer...but it all begins with gratitude...

So, very literally....

Thanks be to God. Amen.