

Thanksgiving Homily For All Ages 2004
"Because They Were Grateful" Rev. Victoria Weinstein

I was a little startled by something I read not long ago. The quote was from the 13th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, whose works are very popular right now, having been translated beautifully by Coleman Barks. He is apparently America's #1 poet, if you go by book sales. So I read this quote by Rumi, which goes, "If you are not offering your praise and thanksgiving, you are stealing from the whole world." And he adds for emphasis, "You are a shoplifter!"

Well, that doesn't seem quite fair, does it? I thought of the people I know who are having a hard time with their lives for various reasons, and I thought how awful it would be to say to them, "Well listen, sorry for all your troubles, but Rumi says if you're not going around with a grateful heart, you're a thief. You're a shoplifter." You could hardly blame someone for hanging up on me if I ever said that. And I can't say as I'd do any differently if someone said the same thing to me when I was having a tough time. They could be full of thanksgiving that I didn't tell them what I was really thinking!

But you know, those deeply spiritual people we think of as great teachers of the inner life don't usually make many big bloopers, so I gave it some more thought. I thought about some people I know right now who have some big troubles in their lives – serious things, and it occurred to me that when I talk to those people, they always have a mix of news to share. On one hand, they've got their worries. But on the other hand, they all have their blessings, too, and just as soon as they share their worries they always follow up with some sense of gratitude.

One member of this church has been really sick for a long time and she updates me regularly on her visits to the doctors and the hospitals, and the sufferings that she endures in her body as she gathers strength and health very slowly. But then she'll add, "I got to spend some time with my kids this weekend. And every day I really hope to have enough energy to cook dinner. That's my goal. I'm so grateful when I can make dinner." She says she's got a recipe for duck and for three-layer chocolate coconut cake ready for Thanksgiving, and she's looking forward to having enough strength on Thursday to make this dinner. Maybe she'll get to make part of it and her husband and son will help with the rest (she thinks it will be pretty entertaining to see how well they'll do following these recipes!). Whatever happens, she's going to be grateful. There's always something to be grateful for.

I never made a duck in my life. I think with admiration, boy, this lady is no shoplifter. Every day, even with all she's dealing with, she's making sure she's counting up the good things in her life and making some to look forward to.

Another member of our church had some really bad luck lately. Someone she trusted betrayed her trust and as it turns out, all of her life savings could be gone. She's hopeful that they're not and she's working really hard to make sure they're not... but at this point she's not sure. But she said to me, "I'm healthy. My kids are healthy. Thank God. I know I can go back to work if I need to. I will get through this. The news could have been worse." With everything she has on her mind, she's making sure to keep a thankful heart beating.

Earlier this week Becky Smock's doctor told her she must get to Mass General Hospital for an emergency appointment -- there was something

drastically wrong with her eye and she should not drive herself. This was very unexpected and Becky had no way to get all the way into the city that afternoon. So she called the church. Today Becky is home recovering from surgery for a detached retina and a tear in her eye. She's not supposed to pick up her head and she's been told not to read or use the computer for six weeks, but she's feeling grateful today -- for this church and particularly for Len Cole, who cancelled whatever plans he had had for Wednesday to get right in his car and drive her to the hospital. "Please tell Len how much I appreciate him, and the church," she said last night. "I feel their spirit."

She feels your spirit, and it helps her heal.

Why do people continue to count their blessings in hard times? And why do the spiritual leaders say we should? It's not just to be cheerful, is it? It's not just so we don't depress others with our burdens and care, is it? I hope not. I hope you all know you are welcome to be share your dejected, upset and depressed self within this community just as much as you are your "up" self: we are all human and we're welcome here to be fully human.

But when I think about you and how you bear the various sufferings that enter your life, how you find the strength to be there for others even when you have every right to stay to yourself and accept, rather than give, care, and how you make a steady effort to find a bright lining even in the darkest cloud, the word that comes to my mind is courage. It occurs to me that gratitude and courage are intimately related virtues, and that the person who maintains a spirit of thanksgiving is also the person who has the courage to endure many difficult and painful realities. There is tremendous wisdom in living this way, an intelligence beyond what I myself can always access. When I cannot, I live by

your lights. So it is in the church. We live by each other's lights, and by each other's courage.

Let me share with you a question asked by the minister Peter Fleck, in his book *The Mask of Religion*. He asks, "... do we have a right to be thankful as long as others are excluded from sharing in the blessings we enjoy?" And the answer he gives points right to the heart of what I have observed in you. He says, "The answer to this question lies in the realization that thankfulness, while it may relate to specifics, has an absolute character. To give thanks is a basic human need, an essential element in our relationship to the universe. Thankfulness is independent of specifics."

Many people, he writes later on, assume that the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving feasts because they were so grateful for having survived their first winter in the New World, when so many of the others who came over with them died. Maybe we should look at that differently, suggests Peter Fleck.

"It seems to me," he says, "that they were able to survive because they were thankful."

I've often thought about the fact that our congregation was first gathered not that many years after the first harvest feast was celebrated in 1621. I've thought that while we're certainly different in many important ways from those earliest foremothers and fathers, we must have a kind of spiritual "through line" to those first Pilgrims, or else the congregation, like so many others, would have splintered and broken up somewhere along those 362 years. I think now that maybe an "attitude of gratitude" is that through line. They survived because they were grateful. To this day, we too deal with life's peaks and valleys with similar determination to appreciate the things that *are* good and right and worth

praising, even in the bleakest seasons, and this gives us strength to face another day. Let this be a spiritual inheritance we transmit to many future generations... starting with our own children.

We will now share our Harvest Communion of cranberry juice and cornbread...