

Give us grateful hearts, O God,
that we may sing your praises at all times and in all places,
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

“Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, ... giving thanks to God ... at all times and for everything.” That’s from today’s second lesson, from the Letter to the Ephesians. Give thanks to God at all times and for all things. At all times, and for all things? Frankly, I can think of a bajillion things for which I don’t feel all that grateful. I’ll bet you can too.

I’m not all grateful, especially as I grow older, for mounting aches and pains, and I’m not at all grateful that I don’t look like Miss America. Nor am I especially thankful for life’s disappointments, great and small, or for the ugliness of life, like violence on the streets of our cities, or wars throughout the world.

That’s a tall order, what scripture asks: that we give thanks at all times and for all things. But even as I squirm a bit at what scripture asks, I am reminded of a very interesting experience I had a few years ago around the whole notion of giving thanks to God.

It happened during Lent, one year when I was the Chaplain at Trinity College in Hartford. We ‘Chapel Rats’ as we were described, decided that instead of giving up something for Lent, we would, as our Lenten discipline, take on something.

And what we ‘took on’ was this. We promised that whenever we say our prayers during Lent (both individually and collectively) we wouldn’t ask for anything – either on our on behalf, or on behalf of someone else – without first giving thanks. So, for example, before we prayed for Aunt Tillie, who was sick, we gave thanks – either for someone’s recovery from illness or for our own good health. Before students prayed for an upcoming exam, they gave thanks for the gift of a good mind, or for a fine professor.

Well, as the Chaplain, I was most interested in what effect this Lenten discipline might have on the students. I was completely unprepared for the transforming effect it had on me.

For starters, I began seeing life through a vastly different set of lenses. I started seeing a whole host of ways – large and small – in which my life is truly blessed. And I found myself giving thanks for things I would normally take for granted, like a nice warm bed, and for electricity so that I could brew a cup of coffee when I got up each day. I even gave thanks for my alarm clock, because it got me up on time!

But I also gave thanks for life's larger blessings – like the God who loves even the likes of me. And in the midst of all those prayers of thanks, I also began to acknowledge much more consciously that all those blessings – large and small – are gifts from God.

Can you imagine how much more pleasant life seemed? Needless to say, we 'Chapel rats' didn't do all this perfectly. We didn't suddenly become perfect at giving thanks to God at all times and for all things. Frankly, I would still rather look like Miss America. But something really powerful did happen, because we did become a community that knew a lot more than we had before about giving thanks to God, and about how richly blessed we are.

That discipline of thanksgiving had another effect in our lives. As the habit of giving thanks made us much more mindful of whose world it is in the first place, we began to see our behavior – all of our behavior, from dawn to dusk – as a reflection of life lived in concert with God.

And then, we began to hear God's scripture in new ways, especially God's commandments. We were used to hearing God's commandments as restrictive – as limitations on our behaviors, you know all those 'thou shalt not's'. And it wasn't just the commandments – the big 10 – that we began to hear in new ways, but the other ethical injunctions as well. We heard quite a few of those in this morning's lessons.

“Lay aside immaturity” (that's from Proverbs).

And, from the Letter to the Ephesians: “be careful how you live, making the most of the time; ... do not get drunk with wine”.

(As you might imagine, that was a huge hit with the college students!)

But as we began to focus more on the giver of every good gift because we were giving thanks more deliberately and more often, we began to encounter those ethical injunctions not as attempts on God's part to cramp our style, or simply as a list of do's and don't's. Instead, we began to see our behavior as somehow living a new kind of life – a transformed and positive kind of life – a life with God, a life lived under the protective wind of a loving, caring, and vastly generous God.

That Lenten discipline was, in a word, transforming for that little band of Christians at Trinity College – and for their Chaplain. Mind you, I still don't understand why there is misery in this world, and I don't always understand why or even how to give thanks in some circumstances. 'Thank you, O Lord, that I have the flu.' ??? Also, frankly, I can only imagine that in this time of transisiton here at St. Ann's, giving thanks might seem a bit of a challenge.

But two things that became clear to us during that transforming Lent, were, first, that God never promised a painless life, but second, that God has never promised – or even suggested – that we would always understand. As today's lesson from Proverbs suggests, even 'the simple' and 'those without sense' are invited to God's party.

In fact, none of us, simple or otherwise, can understand. The element of mystery is always going to be part of our encounter with the transcendent God. But 'mystery' doesn't mean that we stop using our intellectual and rational abilities. What it does mean is that what God has done in Christ doesn't depend on our intellectual and rational abilities. So, for example, we don't have to 'understand' fully what God did in Jesus Christ in order to be both affected and transformed by what God did in Jesus Christ. And Jesus probably had no intention of making the Eucharist 'comprehensible' to us. Instead, he made it our salvation. And what Jesus asks in return is that we give thanks for what God offers – that we give thanks with our words and in our prayers and through our lives. Jesus asks that we live as fully as we can the promises of our baptismal covenant. And that is a tall order.

But when we really look for the many ways God blesses our lives it's utterly stunning what we discover. Who knows, it may be easier than we think to give thanks to God at all times and for all things.

Amen.

