

# The Spiritual Discipline of Gratitude

By Pr. Jennifer S. Hitt, Grace Lutheran Church, Needham, Mass.

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)*

For what are you grateful? The unrestrained giggles of a child? A good book? A warm spring breeze through an open window? What about your dysfunctional family? (Oh, come on – they’re all dysfunctional.) The work you have to do – even though it’s more than you can possibly accomplish? Can you be grateful for mixed blessings? Can you be grateful for things that don’t remotely resemble blessings?



**Pr. Jennifer S. Hitt**

When I was going through a difficult situation, a wise mentor told me to take a deep breath and give thanks to God. She didn’t say it in a facile way – she knew that it would be nearly impossible for me. “Give thanks in all circumstances,” she reminded me. Gradually, the spiritual discipline of gratitude took root in me. The situation didn’t change much, but I did. I didn’t expect that one comment to produce a “discipline” in me, but it did! Now, when I encounter a difficult situation, I take a deep breath, muster all my courage, and say a prayer of thankfulness. It’s not always easy. Sometimes it’s like wrestling the stranger (an angel? God?) at the Jabbok, but the discipline of gratitude has shifted the way I experience life. There is gift in the shades of grey.

I’m not suggesting gratitude in the wake of tragedy, in the face of the death of a child, or when encountering evil. In those situations, I’m grateful only for the outstretched, wounded hands of Christ, for the gift of tears, and for my companions on the journey.

Each of us engages spiritual disciplines differently. Some need structure and rules. Some just need an idea. If you’d find it helpful, start a gratitude prayer journal. Each day, make a list of things for which you’re grateful. Be sure to keep going long enough each day so that you get to the things that are harder to be grateful for. Those mixed blessings. Those things that don’t remotely resemble blessings.

George Herbert, in his poem “Gratefulness” asks God for a grateful heart – “Not thankful, when it pleases me; As if your blessings had spare days, But such a heart, whose pulse may be Your praise.”

... for which I'm grateful

Orangeries and palm houses – huge glass greenhouses filled with the smell of damp earth, leaves big enough to hold a roasted turkey. Reverse snowglobe sanctuary from gathering drifts. The sense of gentle growing things, whispering “sink your roots, lift your branches, join us.” Resurrection.

Tulips – salmon pink – hundreds, blooming in random clumps. (Not marching in ordered rows – flowers should gather, congregate, mingle – never stand at attention.)

Basil – flats of it, so we can have pesto all summer, into the fall, maybe enough for the world. It could be the secret to world peace.

Apple picking in October, as soon as the McIntosh are ripe, the smell of burning leaves in the air.

Fireplaces, campfires, candlelight. The presumption to think we can contain flame. Pentecost.

The gift of sight – to see starlight as well as sidewalks littered with shattered glass.

The pitcher and washbowl set from my grandmother – the one with the crack in it. (The perfect one was set aside for the auction, but mine still holds water and an armful of lilacs.)

For cracked things of all sorts. And for lilacs.

For growing up in a town where the local VA patients wandered Main Street on day passes. I've met both Julius Caesar and Jesus, in short, high-waisted pants, white socks and bedroom slippers.

The cello, the way it vibrates against your body, filling the aching spaces inside until it's all music.

Naps, without alarm clocks, lasting all Sunday afternoon and into next week. Down comforters; clean sheets worn soft, dried on the line; fresh air through an open window.

Camel hair blazers, cashmere sweaters, silk pajamas, soft things of all sorts.

For quirky, kangaroo conversations. The gift of a listening heart. Questions with no answers that make the world richer for having been asked.

Four-year-olds and impertinent questions: “Is that the truth?” 15-year-olds and direct questions: “How can that be true?” Grownups’ questions: “Why did this have to happen?” For questions themselves – and for those who ask the questions.

The clipping on my refrigerator: “Freedom from the desire for an answer is essential to the understanding of a problem.”

30-year high school reunions. Bernie picked on me as if it were first grade. High school never happened. The decades since never happened. We were back in Mrs. Henahan’s class: class clown and smart kid, take two.

My sister, who calls me every year on my birthday to tell me some trivial story, but never remembers it’s my birthday.

For birthdays – and any reason to celebrate life. For presents that say, “I know you.” The perfect rock. A new box of crayons. Something sparkly. A story. Freesia.

For each and every person I’ve known.

For the spiritual discipline of gratitude.

Posted 4/28/09