

Being Truly Grateful

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So what is the point? We began this morning with the words from the Hindu poet Kalidasa who reminds us to “Look to this day! For it is life, the very life of life... For yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision; but today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.” How we live this day really says WHO we choose to be. The Sufi poet Jelaludin Rumi describes our life as a Guest House, with each morning bringing a new arrival. Whether it is a joy, a kindness, a depression, or even a meanness, he reminds us to greet each one gratefully, each can be a guide for us along our way. When we get that big promotion, it is but a guest along our path. When we are fired or laid off, it is but one more guest come to our house. When we have a newborn child or grandchild to love, let us rejoice in life. When we have a sudden, unexpected or painful death, let us also recognize that it is a part of this life. It is all part of being truly alive. We are to be joyful, to be truly thankful, not for anyone else's sake but for our own. Kaladasa, the Hindu holy man and Rumi, the Muslim holy man are talking about how we should live our life so that WE get the most from our life. This is OUR life. The attitude with which we approach it will largely determine what we get out of it. Look well therefore to this day!

I am reminded of a Thanksgiving story about two New England farmers. It seems there was a certain Vermont farmer who worked ceaselessly and could never get ahead. Every morning she would reluctantly rise at dawn and stumble down to a cold breakfast. Then she would work from sunup to sundown on her farm: feeding the chickens, milking the cows, haying in the field. Each November, when the last of the harvest was in, she would load into her wagon all the results of the harvest, and take it down to Boston to sell it. First she would sell all her produce, and then she would buy what she needed for the coming year. Then she would quietly make her way home mournfully and morose back to begin another year of thankless toil. She had a neighbor who worked ceaselessly as well but she always seemed to be content. Every morning she would joyfully rise to greet the dawn and stumble down to a cold breakfast. Then she would work from sunup to sundown on her farm: feeding her chickens, milking the cows, haying in the fields. Each November, when the last of the harvest was in, she would pile into her wagon all the result of the harvest, and take it all down to Boston to sell it. First she would sell everything in the wagon and then buy what she needed for the coming year. Then she would return home joyfully and eagerly to begin to work again. She was truly thankful for the life she was able to lead; though it sometimes bothered her that she often met her grim morose thankless neighbor on her way home. This being truly grateful has little to do with what actually happens in our lives, rather it is a state of mind, being grateful for whatever we have is an important part of our spiritual journey to joy!

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” This opens the very first Psalm in the Hebrew Scriptures which blesses those who have transcended their illusions

of success, women and men who have opened their hearts to delight in the way things truly are. "They are like trees planted near flowing rivers, which bear fruit when they are ready. Their leaves will not fall or wither. Everything they do will succeed." To put it another way, to live life thankfully is the key to having a life worth being thankful for, not the other way around. Your happiness is in your own hands. No one else can make you happy; this is a good thing! Perhaps I haven't yet truly persuaded you that your happiness is really in your own hands. So let me tell you one more story, this one from the Dalai Lama from his book The Art of Happiness: "Two years ago, a friend of mine had an unexpected windfall. Eighteen months before that time she had quit her job as a nurse to go work for two friends who were starting a small healthcare company. The company enjoyed meteoric success, and within eighteen months they were bought out by a large conglomerate for a huge sum. Having gotten in on the ground floor of the company, my friend emerged from the buyout dripping with stock options – enough to be able to retire at the age of thirty-two. I saw her not long ago and asked how she was enjoying her retirement. 'Well,' she said, 'it's great being able to travel and do the things that I've always wanted to do. But,' she added, 'it's strange; after I got over the excitement of making all that money, things kind of returned to normal. I mean things are different – I bought a new house and stuff – but overall I don't think that I'm much happier than I was before.'

"Just around the time that my friend was cashing in on her windfall profits, I had another friend of the same age who found out he was HIV positive. We spoke about how he was dealing with his HIV status. 'Of course, I was devastated at first,' he said. 'And it took me almost a year just to come to terms with the fact that I had the virus. But over the past year things have changed. I seem to get more out of each day than I ever did before, and on a moment-to-moment basis, I feel happier than I ever have. I just seem to appreciate everyday things more, and I'm grateful that so far I haven't developed any severe symptoms and I can really enjoy the things I have. And even though I'd rather not be HIV positive, I have to admit that in some ways it has transformed my life...in positive ways.' 'In what ways?' asked the Dalai Lama. 'Well, for instance, you know that I've always tended to be a confirmed materialist. But over the past year coming to terms with my mortality has opened up a whole new world. I've started exploring spirituality for the first time in my life, reading a lot of books on the subject and talking to people... discovering so many things that I've never even thought about before. It makes me excited about just getting up in the morning, and seeing what the day will bring.'" As the Dalai Lama would teach us, if we live life thankfully, we truly have much to be thankful for. How we live our lives, our very attitudes towards our life, determines what kind of people we will become in this life. This is our life, live it well!

This is also the lesson that the Apostle Paul tries to convey in his letter to the Thessalonians. Thessalonica was a noble city, it had been the birthplace of Alexander the Great and was now the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul opens his letter expressing his own thanksgiving for the works of this church and ends by advising the Thessalonians how to live in a hostile world. He tells them to go out into the world in peace, to have courage, to admonish idlers, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering and be patient with everyone. He tells them to return to no person evil for

evil, but rather seek what is good for each other, and for all people. Most importantly, he says to rejoice always, to pray constantly, and give thanks for everything. The Christian Paul, Buddhist Dalai Lama, Muslim Rumi and Hindu Kalidasa are trying, each in their own way, to teach us what it means to be a whole and healthy person, living in right relation with the world.

We ought to pay attention. These are not merely wistful sentiments. From his other writings, we know that Kalidasa knew about death and the misery in this world. Yet he calls us to look well to this day. Jelaluddin Rumi was born in what now is Afghanistan, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, yet he had to flee his perpetually troubled homeland before he was even ten years old, a refugee from the invading Mongol armies. His family lost most of their possessions, and lived in fear, yet he taught that we should take life as it comes on its own terms. The Dalai Lama lost his wealth, his people and his homeland while he was also but a boy. He could easily have become bitter and have had a bleak outlook on his life. Yet he speaks of the sources of happiness and suggests that our philosophy and attitude determine what we will get out of this life. And the Apostle Paul, when he had become world weary, having traveled enormous distances on his missionary tour, finds he must write to Thessalonica to defend himself against accusations concerning his teachings and his very character. Yet he remembers to end his letter reminding them to rejoice always, give thanks for everything, and hold on to what is good in this life. This message is clear, whether from Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or Jew: We are to live this life thankfully if we wish to live this life fully. This is a lesson for today and for all time! Blessed be and Amen.