

No Cheap Grace: Gratitude in the Hard Times
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meetinghouse in Chatham
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You don't expect to find theological questions posed in the daily New York Times crossword puzzle, but there it was this Wednesday. The clue for 48 across was "what makes God good?" 48-across had space for three letters.¹

Normally I work the crossword as recreation, trying to escape from the rigors of ministry; my purpose is simply a few minutes of chasing bits of trivia around the echoing caverns in my brain, perhaps staving off approaching senility. But theological questions have a way of popping up in the most unlikely places. And only three letters for the answer.

People have been asking for millennia what makes God good, or, to put it another way, why there is so much misery and suffering in human life if a good God is in control? Wouldn't you think that if there really was a God and she/he/it really was in charge, this would be an earthly paradise and we wouldn't have things like racism, homophobia, auto accidents, cancer, war, recession just to name a few?

Yet here we are and now in particular we seem to be in a perfect storm of woes. Things are happening to the economy that we only dimly understand but a lot of us are a lot poorer than we were six weeks ago, and some of us have had to put plans on hold. Dearly beloved folks right here in our midst continue to be afflicted with severe problems of personal health, two of them due to an auto accident that happened right outside the church. In our world, our use of fossil fuels continues to rise, bringing us closer to the precipice of global catastrophe. Poverty is getting worse, AIDS and other epidemics continue their swath of destruction, and the threat of terrorism still lurks.

So we ask in this season of Thanksgiving what it is we have to be grateful for. I think the answer tells us a bit about what it is to be grateful, and why we feel gratitude.

It is easy to feel grateful when we see a beautiful sunset, when the birds are singing, when we have landed that job we were looking for, got an A on the test, or had the woman of our dreams agree to marry us. When we are winning, when things are looking up, when we are in the groove, when our very being seems resonant with all that is in the universe, when the people around us are sweet and attentive and agreeable, when beauty smacks us in the face at every turn, then gratitude comes bubbling up so naturally, like a geyser erupting from the depths of our souls. We might break into song. Gratitude is natural in the good times.

But what about the hard times? What about the days when everyone around you is irritating the bejesus out of you but you have to deal with them anyway, when you can't find your car keys, when your itch breaks out again in that unmentionable place, when the clothes no longer fit, when

¹New York Time crossword Wednesday, Nov. 19, 2008

your broker tells you just how much money you've lost? Where is there in all the dreck of your life something to say grace over?

The sunny-day gratitude is like what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. Bonhoeffer knew a bit about hard times. He was one of the few Christian voices publicly opposed to Hitler in Germany in the 1930's. He refused asylum in America. Though he was a very ethical Lutheran minister and theologian, he willingly joined in a plot to overthrow the Reich by killing Hitler. He was executed just a month before the war ended.

His most widely read book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, was first published in 1937. It begins, "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace." He went on to explain

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."²

Bonhoeffer contrasts cheap grace with costly grace:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

I bring these words to you because I am moved by them, but I am also not sure how to apply them to a liberal church in the US in 2008. You have to admire Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the courage with which he lived and died. He certainly walked his talk. And he was speaking from within a societal breakdown much more extreme than anything we have experienced or are likely to experience in the present age. His was not just hard times, it was a national and ultimately continental nightmare. Theologically, Bonhoeffer was of course speaking from the Lutheran tradition, and it is hard to translate these ideas into our liberal tradition.

Our tradition rejects the idea of redemptive suffering, that suffering is good or noble. Rebecca Parker, our distinguished dean of Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, co-authored a book a few years ago called *Proverbs of Ashes* which shows this well. Suffering is not good, but suffering is. For all our attempts to create justice, life has an unavoidable element of unfairness. You drive down from Boston after spending a day tending your granddaughter in order to come to a church meeting on small group ministry, after having just given eloquent testimony for small group ministry the day before. You are walking across the street to come into the warm embrace of the people you have gotten to know and love. Suddenly a motorist who for some reason doesn't see you

²Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* p. 47 (MacMillan 1963), reproduced in <http://www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html>

barrels through and you are seriously injured and your whole life is in the balance. It's a crying shame. There is nothing good, noble or elevating about it.

Yet though we start from different theological premises than Bonhoeffer, I think there is something we can use in his distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. I like to think there is cheap gratitude and costly gratitude. If we can find it within ourselves to be grateful even when things go rotten, it will be infinitely more precious and sustaining than gratitude in the easy times.

So we might say cheap gratitude is gratitude when things are going well. Cheap gratitude is being thankful for music and fine wines and sunny days. A fair-weather gratitude.

To be committed to a religious life is to seek a deeper level of gratitude. A habit of gratitude. A costly gratitude.

Do you know how Thanksgiving came about as an American national holiday? How many of you know the name Sarah Josepha Hale? Sarah Josepha Hale was a single mom, a magazine writer and editor in the mid-nineteenth century. Her most lasting contribution to American letters is the poem, "Mary Had a Little Lamb." But she is also the mother of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. As the nation was spiraling down towards war over the slavery issue, Sarah Josepha Hale started writing the President to declare a National Day of Thanksgiving. Many states already had them. She tried with Pierce and then with Buchanan, but got nowhere. Finally she tried with Lincoln, and in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln agreed and issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation. Talk about gratitude in hard times. The war had exceeded anyone's wildest expectations in ferocity and suffering was all around. Yet Lincoln finds things for which to be grateful:

"In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People."

No mortal hand worked out these great things – this thought is an echo of Job, and it is

probably to Job that Lincoln turned for a lesson on how to have gratitude in hard times.

Job is a folk tale, and it is a profound reflection on why bad things happen to good people. In the case of Job, all the disasters befall him because of a challenge that Satan makes to God at the outset of the story. Satan, who in this context is more the accuser, the prosecuting attorney, than the embodiment of evil he becomes in the New Testament, says that Job is only loyal to God because God has been good to Job. Take away his blessings, Satan predicts, and Job will curse God. But for all the misfortunes visited on him, Job remains steadfast in his own righteousness and in refusing to curse God. At the end he is rewarded by having more blessings bestowed on him. But that is not the point. The point is that he has kept his integrity and showed that his loyalty to God is not because such loyalty is profitable.

Job did not have cheap gratitude. He did not praise God on account of his blessings, nor did he curse God when those blessings were taken away.

What the Job story shows us is that there is a necessary relation between what to be grateful for and whom to be grateful to.

What are we grateful for? We can be grateful for specific blessings, but underneath those blessings, the ultimate reason for gratitude is the fact of our own existence. In a church I previously served we said this affirmation every Sunday:

“Life is a gift for which we are grateful; we gather in community to celebrate the glories and the mysteries of this great gift.”

Ultimately our life, our existence here, our ability to witness and experience both the joys and the pains that pass through us is the “for what” of gratitude. But what about the “to whom?” To me, the object of gratitude can be summed up in the phrase, the source of who I am. Each of us owes our existence to a series of improbable circumstances. On the most biological level, one particular sperm out of thousands united with one particular egg to produce you, the organism. Those two germs cells were produced by your parents, and the way that they got together is a story in itself. Each of them had to live to the age to get together and have you. Each of their parents did too, and on back in time to the beginning.

None of us would be here if this earth had not cooled out of the cosmic dust, if the conditions of temperature and chemistry had not been just right to enable water to form and eventually for life to begin. We owe all of our evolutionary ancestors back to the single-celled amoeba in the puddle.

And that’s just for our physical selves. We are also all the ideas we’ve ever had, and all the skills we have acquired, for which we can thank generations of teachers as well as our families.

In short, you can thank everything and everyone that has made you you. Some of us will see behind this multiplicity of sources of our existence one big source. Some will call this source God. Some may call it the wellspring or, as one of my favorite hymns puts it, the fount of every blessing. In our reading today, the writer used the analogy of a river which returns to the sea.

Gratitude is the connection with the source of our being. It is like Bonhoeffer’s costly grace, like Job’s integrity. It does not depend on particular blessings, and perhaps it shows itself most powerfully in the face of suffering.

But the “to whom” of gratitude also informs the “for what.” For when we realize the sources of where we come from, we realize that they are in common with others. All of us here are bound together as children of this earth, and some will say, children of God. We recognize and are grateful for the deep connection that we carry as fellow humans on this planet.

Now I realize I probably lost some of you in the second paragraph of this sermon because some of you have been trying to figure out a three-letter answer to the question of what makes God good. Who has the answer? The answer is “an o.” Insertion of the letter “o” into the word God makes it good. If all theological questions were only so simple. But it is also profound, for it illustrates how much energy we expend worrying about the existence or nonexistence of God, when the more important focus is the existence or nonexistence of good, that is, whether the world taken as a whole is benevolent.

And the answer is of course that it depends. There are destructive forces as well as creative. Among the gloom and doom I’ve been dwelling on here, I haven’t even mentioned the new breath of air sweeping in from the political realm, and the reawakening of hope for forward progress on a number of issues dear to us. Whatever the source is, whatever we call it, it clearly delivers the good and the bad. Gratitude is embracing it all.

“We are what we are given and what is taken away, blessed by the name of the giver and taker... The confluence of all things returns to the Sea, the Source. The Gift unites with the Giver. Let the river run. The banks of my heart are wide with thanks.”

Amen.

Reading:

Run River Run

By Susan Hull

We are what we are given/and what is taken away... — Wendell Berry

Norman Maclean wades into the swift silver of Big Blackfoot River, casting for memories with the same reverence that he reserves for trout. Planting his feet in the slowly deepening riverbed, Norman begins to hear the long story of his life cascading by — from his birth in Missoula, Montana, where the river banks were the breasts on which he fed as a child, through a restive adolescent initiation in the roaring rapids, the still reflections of his first love, to the dark eddies of gambling and debt that pulled his brother under. Now all are gone home before him in that great race to the sea. "Eventually," Norman concludes from the timeless sibilant prayer of water on rock, "eventually all things merge into One, and a River runs through it."

There is a river that runs through us. It is Mystery, it is Life, some say God. It descends through my granite soul with the force of gravity and love, plunges through empty canyons, chisels out corridors with its wet hands and slowly, ever so, widens the cracks and crevices of my failures into pools where grace collects. The injury of the river is also its gift. Where I have been cut deeply, so there Life most

deeply, most surely, flows.

I don't believe that the gifts of God come in the form of goodness, but in the face of Life itself. In danger's shadow as well as dazzling light, in a disquieted heart as often as a still mind, in labor as in love. If we would receive the sacred, we must receive the river's flow, even as it injures, even as it takes away.

I thank God for my handicaps said Helen Keller, unable to hear a bubbling stream or see its glistening green or put it into praise. Yet she praises: I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work, my God.

That, to me, is thanksgiving. It's not about being glad for the good things that have happened to us — they are simply moments in the sun. Thanksgiving is standing still, with an injured and an open heart and letting the River run freely through us. Each year at this time, I stop and cast into the water. I recount the story of the year past, of life given and taken away: our planet's staggering losses, our moments of forgiveness, our fulgent gains. I think of a friend's child who came swimming into this world on amniotic rivers, and I remember my grandmother's final crossing over t the other shore. I remember the intense hope of eyes brimming with the vows of marriage, and the loosening tears of those whose hope was broken. I think of my own love found, or friends lost.

We are what we are given and what is taken away, blessed by the name of the giver and taker... The confluence of all things returns to the Sea, the Source. The Gift unites with the Giver. Let the river run. The banks of my heart are wide with thanks