

Presence

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
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Ancient Witness: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

It's a very religious thing to do—giving thanks. It's a sign of a spiritually sensitive person. And it was the mystic, Meister Eckhart who said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it would be enough." In the Christian New Testament, it was Paul who wrote, "give thanks in all circumstances." True gratitude is not dependent or determined by external circumstances. It can emerge in all circumstances.

For most of us most of the time, this is impossible to achieve. It's hardly humanly possible. For most of us most of the time, our ability to give thanks is based on our external circumstances. For some circumstances we feel grateful; for others we do not.

So today I want to talk about gratitude—the kind of difference it can make in our lives and how we can be better at it.

About 15 years ago I watched a movie called, "The Secret," which is kind of a new age spiritual examination of something the presenters call "the law of attraction." This is the notion that whatever we are focused upon is what we tend to attract into our lives—either positively or negatively. And because of this, it is very important to maintain a positive focus, to frame one's desires positively.

Here's an example: Someone might focus on meeting new people—establishing new friendships—and the more he or she focuses on this, the more new people seem to come into their life. But let's say this same desire is framed negatively. There's a fear and resistance to being lonely. The more that this person focuses on not being alone, the more it seems to be true. Kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now it's easy to go too far with this idea. One cannot control the universe with one's thoughts and desires! This would be my major critique of the movie. Often, negative things are going to happen to us no matter how positively focused we are. And therefore we should not blame ourselves or others when this happens.

Some people view prayer like this. If you just pray hard enough, your prayer will be answered. But when prayer isn't answered, the one who prayed is blamed for not having enough faith. This can be very abusive!

But I think there is some truth to this phenomenon. Often when we focus on keeping something out of our lives—on *what we don't want*—failure, rejection, poverty—then often that is what we get. On the other hand, when our desires are focused more positively on *things we do want*—success, love, acceptance—then often that is what we attract.

This might be what Jesus was talking about when he referred to having “faith that can move mountains.” It’s a way of living that is not based upon fear or anxiety or keeping bad things from happening to us. Rather, it is a way of living that is focused on bringing about *positive things*—bringing about healing, wholeness, peace, friendship. Jesus’ life was about a fearless pursuit of these things.

You can say that Jesus was proactive, not reactive. His life was animated by what he *was for*, not what he *was against*. So he wasn’t so much against injustice; he was for justice. He wasn’t against hatred; he was for love.

It is a way of focusing our attention that is *positive, not negative*. What does this have to do with gratitude? Well, when we are in the mode of giving thanks—no matter what the circumstances—our focus is on the positive, on what we are for, not what we are against. And so then we tend to attract these things into our lives and into the world. So *living with gratitude is a way to bring about change*. You want to transform your life and the world? Be grateful. Give thanks. In all circumstances.

Now again, living in *total* gratitude is hardly humanly possible. An unattainable goal. We shouldn’t be discouraged if we don’t give thanks all the time. We shouldn’t beat ourselves up over it. But there are some ways that we can increase our gratitude. One idea that I like is to keep a “gratitude journal.” The idea is that every night write down just three things that happened that day for which you are grateful. They don’t need to be big things; they can just be very small and simple. But the idea is that we begin to *subtly shift the focus* of our attention away from our fears, our disappointments, our anxieties—the things we don’t want—and we subtly shift our focus to those things we want to bring into our lives—what we want more of. *We become more in tune to our truest and deepest desires.*

Reflecting on the past day’s events and focusing on the good, meaningful moments is an effective way to live gratefully, with thanksgiving, and in tune with the power of positive energy in the world.

But there is an even more powerful way to connect with that sense of joy and gratitude. It is a way that you’ve heard me mention many times before and that is expressed through all the major religious traditions. *It is to live our lives in the present moment.*

Buddhist teachers, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn refer to this as mindfulness. “If you bring a certain kind of open, moment to moment, nonjudgmental awareness to what you’re attending to,” he writes, “you’ll begin to develop a more *penetrative awareness that sees beyond the surface* of what’s going on in your field of awareness.”

“Mindfulness makes it possible to *see connections that may not have been visible before*. But seeing these connections doesn’t happen as a result of trying—it simply comes out of stillness.”

Kabat-Zinn talks about cultivating a “don’t know mind,” of “just being still, holding the whole in awareness, not having to have to know anything.” But it is very hard to experience the present in its wholeness and to become fully alive to the present moment.

There are certain times when we do this naturally—when the moment comes to us as something totally new and unique and everything is vivid and alive. Certain moments, such as when your children are born, for example, I can remember taking in everything with all my senses—sight, sound, smell.

But in most of our moments we are not fully present. Most of the time we are acting out of habit—labeling each experience, thinking the same old thoughts. Mindfulness is about experiencing every moment as new, vivid, exciting, absorbing.

And when we do this, we become, in a way, one with the world—in touch with the whole—and one experiences oneself as simply part of an undivided reality. And one views the world not as problems that need solving or obstacles to overcome, but simply as it is.

About 2,500 years ago, Lao Tsu wrote:

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve upon it? The universe is sacred. You cannot improve it. In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired. In pursuit of Tao, everyday something is dropped. Less and less is done. Until non-action is achieved. Tao abides in non-action, yet nothing is left undone.

When we are mindful, in the present moment, we discover the Tao, the creative principle of the universe, the pathway to the source of life. This kind of Wisdom is not attained through knowledge or acquisition. Rather, it is attained through stillness and self-emptiness. As Eckhart said, God is not found through addition; God is found through subtraction.

Being mindful is to be a blank slate, to be surprised each moment, over and over again, continually. Alice Walker once wrote, “Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise.”

And when this happens, we find ourselves being in tune with the intention of the universe. And when our desires become part of the desires of the whole—things happen. Carl Jung talked about this when he defined the term “synchronicity”: “A meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved.” Synchronicity is the coming together of coincidence and something other than chance. David Massing of Intel said, “synchronicity is about being open to what wants to happen.” Or as someone else put it, “The universe wants to help.”

When our positive intentions match the greater intention of the whole, magic begins to unfold. As Goethe said, “At the moment of commitment the universe conspires to assist you.”

There is a Presence in reality that beckons us to kindness, to harmony, to justice. In the Christian tradition we call this Presence, “God.” And this Presence is always with us, in every

circumstance. While other things pass away and leave us, this Presence remains, and there is nothing that can separate us from it. And this Presence is the source of true gratitude.

When we live gratefully in the present moments, we can truly discover our deepest, positive desires, such as love, unity and mutuality—we can find these as part of the sacred intent, the eternal Wisdom of the whole world. And we can discover that the universe is conspiring to assist us.