

So, I chose the primary theme of gratitude a while back, overlooking that this weekend is a milestone of 25 years since the 9/11 tragedy. However, thanksgiving and praise to God is appropriate at all times, or as Paul says, “Give thanks to God *in all circumstances*.” That is not to say that we thank God for everything that happens, but that *in* all circumstances we need the habit of finding the good, giving thanks even just for the *presence* of God, a spirit that weeps with us and heals.

I do want to start with some basic and universal reasons for giving thanks... For parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, mentors that have loved us... For the gift of sleep (the quietness, the darkness, a time of renewal)... For the gift of sunlight (sunrises and sunsets, for warmth that soothes and energizes)... For the gift of rain (we might gripe and complain, but we know we need it for flowers and trees and vegetables... not to mention a good time to stay inside to read, cook play cards, etc). We can find *many* reasons to be thankful, at any given moment! Gratitude is a great habit, even discipline to cultivate.

Speaking of griping and complaining about rain, we do often have a choice to gripe and complain, or to keep a spirit of thanksgiving and hope. I’m not talking about deep grief and lament (we all need to mourn our losses and complain about the injustices of life). I mean complaining little things, like that “whiner” family on Saturday night live, whining about every little dissatisfaction. Let me share a wonderful devotional by a new favorite writer, Melanie Svoboda, a “sister of Notre Dame.” About groceries: Do we complain, or nurture an attitude of gratitude?

A. These groceries weigh a ton. I hate carrying these heavy bags.

B. How lucky I am to have all this food to put in my fridge.

A. Darn! Bananas went up 10 cents a pound!

B. Thank you God, for bananas in December, avocados too!

A. I hate this freezer. So small, I can hardly fit anything in!

B. How lucky I am to own a freezer; most of the world has never even seen one.

Gratitude! We can keep an attitude of gratitude, if we practice, and get into the habit. Sister Melanie's devotional on groceries made me think of being thankful while taking a hot shower; so many people don't even have running water! A good practice is the habit of saying Thanks before eating... No pressure, no performance, no judgment... we can just be thankful even quietly inside our own head! Or, a brief memorized one can be easy...as well as be a memory of our parents or grandparents. (Bless this food to our use and us to they service, in Christ name we ask it.) Or the church song: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" Or "Thanks to God for this food and the earth that grew it, the farmers that harvested it and the hands that made it" (And many add: "we are mindful of those who have little food or water.)

So how about Paul's "in all circumstances" phrase? Sometime we may have to look hard to find anything to be thankful for.... How about a night with many mosquitoes (well, I guess in the order of creation, they are part of the food chain, for bats I think)... How about when my dog starts barking at passersby at 5AM (Well, he's just trying to be a good protector)How about people that annoy or hurt us (Well, there is usually some lesson to be learned in every relationship... a chance to stretch our understanding of people different from us, a chance to see some of our own flaws, even a chance to have a firmer boundary, perhaps even shake the dust off our feet and move on, as Jesus said once).

How about more tragic circumstances: bombs that drop, or airplanes that hit twin towers in the heart of our major city? Again, Paul is not saying that we give thanks for the evil attack. But *in* that circumstance we can find reasons for gratitude... as we heard often

on Friday, for the first responders, for the bravery of some on flight 93 to rush the cockpit, for all the relief and healing efforts after the attack.

So where are we now in the aftermath? We can be grateful for learning lessons about war and vengeance. We can be grateful for the Jewish admonition of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (which meant don't ever retaliate more than what was done to you.) We can be grateful for Jesus' deepening of that command when he said, "you have heard it said an eye for an eye, but I say unto you: *Do not resist one who is evil, but love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" Jesus was clearly anti-war and retaliation, clearly on the side of diplomacy and peacemaking.

We remember the words in the Jewish Torah: *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, their foot shall slide in due time!* (Deut.32:35)... which is quoted by Paul later in his letter to the Christians in Rome. (Rom. 12:19). We remember what Jesus said, that "the measure you give, will be the measure you get" (Matthew 7:2) Or in everyday speech: What goes around comes around ("their foot shall slide, in due time!")

"Turn Back, O Man, Forswear Thy Foolish Ways" surely is about the foolishness of war, the ongoing retaliations, the cycle of violence, even escalating violence. The Bible does have passages about God meting out punishment, even death and destruction, but the relentless movement of the Bible is toward mercy, compassion, forgiveness, steadfast love of our God, starting with the rainbow of mercy toward a rebellious world in the time of Noah, and of course culminating in the words of Jesus to not return evil for evil, to not retaliate with an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth.

Of course there are extremists and terrorists, and evil that must be stopped, but not with more killing, or genocidal threats to wipe out an entire civilization. Let me share with you, again, a song I wrote about the Twin Towers in New York City. It is based on a painting and

a poem by my friend Nino Kamalic, about the evil of 9/11, and a commitment to goodness that he affirmed years later. Nino lived near the city and was painting the Twin Towers one winter day, but he neglected to see that he had walked through some “snow angels” that children just made. Nino connected his own destructive footsteps with the destruction of the towers. Yes, very different in scale, but having the same necessary message of care and respect for all our neighbors and their creations. Nino Kamalic asked me to write a song based on his poem. The title is “Angels in the Snow.”

A painter on a hillside one frosty winter's day, hears the laugh of children as in the snow they play. Towers are his subject, a skyline through the haze; angels in the snow, escape his steady gaze. Years later on that hillside, towers we do not see. The painter now reflects upon fallen majesty. Also, in his memory, he hears the children's cry: "don't step on our angels as you're walking by!" It's in us too, an ignorance, things we do not see, the hurt and the shattering, if we act thoughtlessly. Who has done this? Don't they know the love and the pride in this creation now destroyed, anger we can't hide! Towers in the mist, how could they have come down? Angels in the snow, are also holy ground. So I will watch more carefully each step that I take, to safeguard creation, the precious things you make. I won't step on your angels that you carve into the snow. They are your fresh creation, the beauty that you show. If I step on angels that surely are around, to me it may seem nothing, but to you it's towers torn down!

Painter Nino took the intense anger and grief about the twin towers and transformed it into a resolve not to damage anybody's property and creations... even angels in the snow. We can be thankful for all the wonderful creations around us, of God and of the people that God made! Each of us is special, with potential and creativity! Let's honor, respect and give thanks for each and every one! Amen.