



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

NOVEMBER 22, 2018, THANKSGIVING DAY

JOEL 2:21-27; PSALM 126; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; MATTHEW 6:25-33

## HAPPY THANKSGIVING!



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Happy Thanksgiving!

This past Monday morning, while at on the elliptical at the gym, I came across a video of a TED talk on gratefulness offered by Br. David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine Trappist monk. I am very familiar with his writings on gratefulness, and would commend them to everyone, but I found it humorously ironic that the monk whose

spiritual habits including silence except during worship was delivering a talk on one of the world's most secular platforms of speech.<sup>ii</sup>

Just proves once more that any rigidly held dualism of secular and sacred doesn't really make sense.

At any rate, Br. David began his talk to a packed auditorium in Edinburgh by saying he knew something about everyone present, and they knew something about him. That they all desire to be happy. Indeed, all people want to be happy, you and me included, even if we may define that in different ways, In this we are all together. We have that in common.

Some people think that happiness leads to gratitude, but the algebra of that statement quickly breaks down—we all know people who have everything needed in life to be happy, and yet they are not happy. And we all know people who have experienced great loss and misfortune in life, and yet they are happy. Why? Because they are grateful.

It's like a telescope—looking through the wrong end will not open us to the starry heavens, but turn it around, and it all becomes clear. It is gratefulness that leads to happiness. And we all want to be happy.

So then the question becomes, how can we experience gratefulness? Well, it comes as a gift—it can neither be earned or purchased, and it must be valued by us. A gift given us with no expectation of something in return—it evokes gratitude, a spontaneous stirring in the heart that colors the experience such that we know happiness.

But this feeling is like water in the open hand—it cannot be commodified. Again, you cannot purchase it or earn it. It comes in the gift.

But within the gift is another gift—the opportunity to practice gratitude.

A few years ago, Kathy and I received an unexpected gift from a woman we knew several years ago. Her name was Scooter, and she left some money to us that we never expected. We gave some to the church where we first met her and where she worshipped till the day she died, we gave some to Saint Mark's, and with the rest, we bought a hot tub for the deanery (with the wardens permission). It is an asset on the Saint Mark's books—I bet not many churches have a hot tub on their books.

But, you see, whenever Kathy and I enter the hot tub, and gaze up into the night sky, we have this mantra—*Thank you, Scooter*. The gift of gratefulness to Scooter cannot be quantified in the hot tub alone, but the opportunity of a hot tub experience elicits in us the gift of gratitude. The gift within the gift—an opportunity to practice gratitude.

Steindl-Rast suggests that the real key to all this is to translate the experience of gratefulness into living gratefully, and the way we do that is to live each moment presented to us as an opportunity to be grateful.

The challenge is we get so busy we forget this invitation; so much of our lives are lived along a paradigm of commodified earning or purchasing, that we build walls that obstruct the portals into living gratefully in the moment.

But that's okay, he says, because the next moment presents another opportunity. This is the gift of life as God designed it.

This doesn't mean we are supposed to be grateful for everything in life, but we are invited to discover gratitude in every moment, even the difficult ones.

No one is asked to be grateful for violence or war, or cancer or trauma, or the loss of a loved one, or the dissolution of a marriage. These are the source of pain and bewilderment and bereavement.

Seeing the opportunities for gratefulness in the darkness takes courage also, and we should be gentle with ourselves, because if we miss the opportunity in one moment, there comes another, and another.

The koan says the path to peace is patience. The road to gratefulness is one of patience and persistence, and presence.

It takes mindfulness to live gratefully. We get so busy, we rush past so many opportunities. Here's a tool that you might find helpful.

Place a sticky note on a light switch, or the kitchen sink, or your car's dashboard. All simple, mundane things we engage every day without thinking anything about them. But what if the sticky note on the bedroom light switch was a prompt for you to pause briefly, and consider something or someone for which you are grateful. A warm bed, a safe home, a life partner, one's good health.

What if the sticky note on the kitchen sink gave you pause to consider the gift of fresh, potable water, in a world where millions lack such a gift?

What if the sticky note on the dashboard were to invite you into an opportunity to be present to the moment, and to be grateful for those around you, letting go of the impatience that leads to stress or even road rage?

The human heart is hard-wired to be grateful, but quite remarkably, it's like a oil and water, other positive emotions like happiness can mix and mingle in the grateful heart, but negative emotions are repelled.

When we are grateful, we are not fearful, and if we are not fearful, we will not be hateful or violent, and gratefulness, therefore, is the antidote to much that ails the world. Indeed, gratefulness is the gift that transforms not just our lives, but will change the world.

This day is established by our nation, and our church, as a day of thanksgiving, of practicing

gratitude with intention. There can be many distractions today—the fretting over food prep, the gluttonous feast, the football, the family tensions. It can be overwhelming, right?

Consider what little secret prompts you might have today to consider the opportunity to be grateful—as you light the candles on the table, as you slice the turkey, as you place each bite in your mouth, as you finger the remote looking for the right football game. Whatever it is, pause and be grateful, and see what happens to your day.

And let this service of worship be a gift—an invitation to be present, to pause in this moment, and consider what it is that evokes gratefulness for you. For whom are you grateful? And can you let the warmth of that gratefulness pour over your heart as you say, Thank you, God. Because God is the ultimate source of all these gifts of life, my friends. And that is the good news we happily share today.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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***The Gospel for Thanksgiving Day, Year B: Matthew 6:25-33*** [Jesus said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."]

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<sup>i</sup> <https://gratefulness.org/resource/where-did-it-come-from-grateful-living/>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_steindl\\_rast\\_want\\_to\\_be\\_happy\\_be\\_grateful?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful?language=en)