

Gratitude is Optional
Psalm 126, Matthew 6:24-33
November 19, 2006

Joan Chittister was stricken by polio at age sixteen. Too old for the children's unit in the hospital, she was a patient in the women's ward with thirteen other women, all older, most of them mothers with young children. She felt lost, scared, angry, and very, very alone. Depression hung like morning mist over the place.

One day one of the men came rolling in the room, tilting the wheels on his chair in a rakish, boyish way.

"Anybody wanna race?" he called down the center aisle of the ward. "We're getting ready."

"Just get out of here!" shouted a woman sniffing in the corner.

"I do," Joan said. "I want to race. But I don't have a wheelchair."

"Don't worry, kid. We'll be back as soon as you get one," he said as he spun his chair around and rolled back out the door.

Joan says, "Those wheelchair races saved me. I never won any of them but my arms got stronger by the week and I learned to handle the chair. And, most of all, I laughed a lot and made new friends and had a great sense of the possible that carried me for years.

"I learned that the Italians are right. They have a proverb that says, 'Since the house is on fire, let us warm ourselves.' It isn't what happens to us that counts. It's what we do with what happens to us that makes all the difference."¹

It isn't what happens to us that counts. It's how we respond. We have the power to choose our response to the circumstances life presents to us. There are multiple options from which we can choose. We can be angry, feeling that we've been wronged. We can be anxious, fearful of how things will evolve. Another option is dissatisfaction, frustration that things are not going the way we want or planned. Cynics tend to be deeply distrustful of that which is positive and those who are good. Some choose to wallow in resentment, with a persistent displeasure at something regarded as a slight, an insult, or an injury. It seems that some people always find a reason to complain.

Erma Bombeck told a story about the Jewish grandmother who "took her grandson to the beach one day, complete with bucket, shovel and sun hat. The grandmother dozed off and as she slept, a large wave dragged the child out to sea. The grandmother awoke and was devastated. She fell to the ground on her knees and prayed, 'God, if you save my grandchild, I promise

I'll make it up to you. I'll join whatever club you want me to. I'll volunteer at the hospital, give to the poor and do anything that makes you happy.'

"Suddenly, a huge wave tossed her grandson on the beach at her feet. She noticed color in his cheeks and his eyes were bright. He was alive. As she stood up, however, she seemed to be upset. She put her hands on her hips, looked skyward, and said sharply, 'He had a hat, you know.'"²

We have a cafeteria of options from which to choose our responses to the circumstances of life. When our first response to everything is sour, it is no wonder that the situation comes out sour. "The pessimist," Winston Churchill said, "sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

"In Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale *The Snow Queen*, a demon invents a cruel mirror 'which had the power of making everything good or beautiful that was reflected in it almost shrink to nothing, while everything that was worthless and bad looked increased in size and worse than ever.' The mirror is carried up to heaven, but it falls to earth, shattering into millions of pieces. Some of the pieces land in people's eyes, causing them to see only the worst aspects of life. Other fragments strike people in the heart, "and this was very terrible, for their hearts became cold like a lump of ice."³

Distorting mirrors in our lives make life ugly, warp our self-image, and harden our hearts against gratitude. There are a variety of lenses through which we can view life. I remember going to get a new pair of glasses. The optometrist tried a series of lenses before he found the right combination that was not blurry. We can select the lenses through which we look at life. If I walk into a room expecting people to threaten me, that's exactly what I will experience. If I walk into a situation expecting to find enjoyment, I will indeed find something in which to rejoice. We have the freedom to choose our perspective.

Viktor Frankl was an inmate in Auschwitz during World War II. Speaking of those in the concentration camps who devoted their lives to keeping up the spirits of those around them, he wrote, "Everything can be taken from us but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." In the midst of the most dehumanizing of circumstances, Frankl and others deliberately chose hope and even gratitude. Their witness demonstrates that gratitude is innate; it is intrinsic to our human nature. It lies within each of us, waiting only to be acknowledged and to release its blessings.

Faith is about learning to live with trust and gratitude. Jesus knows that we are prone to distort our perception and let anxiety or cynicism or

resentment overcome us. He says, “See the birds of the air. They neither reap nor sow yet our God gives them what they need.” “Faith is knowing that what I’m going through right now is providing something my soul needs and without which I will never grow to full stature as a human being. And that changes our attitude toward everything.”⁴

Life is about learning to quit complaining about everything. Or as Jack Benny said, “I don’t deserve this award, but I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that either.” When we come to realize that life is a series of events—good, bad and indifferent--we will learn to deal with all of them better.

Gratitude is an option, one among many, which we are free to choose in response to life. Gratitude is born of maturity, a ripening of the spirit, an aging of the soul.

Autumn is a season for reflecting upon what it means to be truly alive and for giving thanks for the gifts an authentic life bestows. Those two words, autumn and authenticity, are linguistic cousins. They share the Latin root *aut-*, meaning “to increase or grow.” With autumn comes the increase of the earth, the harvest of bounty. “Authenticity brings the reward of increased self-knowledge and awareness, of a life augmented through integrity. As autumn represents the ripening of the crops, so authenticity represents the coming into maturity of our characters. The link is gratitude, which allows us to ground ourselves in humility and recognize our authentic nature. When we live gratefully, we become more truly ourselves.”⁵

Too frequently we lead inauthentic lives. We hide our true selves, afraid that we won’t be accepted. We wear masks and put on personas, trying to be something we are not, something attractive and successful. We compromise our convictions and ethics to do that which is popular, but not necessarily in our best interests. We can see how the peer pressures of childhood and youth trap us into becoming someone who we are not in order to fit in. This need and desire to fit in haunts us into adulthood. We live inauthentically, untrue to our selves. We fear plumbing the depths of our beings, for we know that we will find dragons lurking in the shadows. When we deny our inner darkness, we give it more power over us, or we project it onto other people, creating “enemies” where none exist. We are ungrateful, complaining, cynical, resentful, because we are not true to ourselves.

There is an old story about an aged pious man, Rabbi Susya, who became fearful as death drew near. His friends chided him: “What! Are you afraid that you’ll be reproached that you weren’t Moses?” “No,” the rabbi replied, “that I was not Susya.”

When too much of ourselves is denied or ignored, we become resentful and bitter. When we know ourselves and are aware of our faults and our gifts, we can live authentically. We can accept the great unfixables and integrate them into our lives. Then we can be truly grateful.

Jesus says to us, “Do not be anxious about your life. Your life, as it is given you by God, is valuable as it is. You need not hide your true self in false garments. If you are true to your God-given design, God will care for you. Seek first a life with God, live in alignment with God, and all that you need will be given you.”

When we stop wasting energy being someone we are not, we are free to be ourselves, as God designed us. Even our brokenness has worth and value once we claim it and own it instead of hiding it or foisting it upon others. When first priority is given to our inner values, not outer values, to our spiritual lives, not our material lives, we will delight in the gift of life and the true selves given us. We will even be grateful.

Gratitude is a mark of maturity. It ripens as we return to our essential nature and escape the trappings we accumulate to fit into the world. The truer we are to ourselves, the more frequently we will choose gratitude as our response to life.

George has been through his share of trials in life, including prostate cancer and the death of his wife. His friends are puzzled by his genuine cheerfulness and upbeat spirit. When asked to share his secret, George says there are basically only three responses to life: “Damn!”, “Help!”, and “Thank you!” He’s tried them all. The first one he described as “like pouring all your energy down a rat hole.” The second was appropriate more often than he would like. But it was the third that produced the most mileage. “I faced a lot of crap in my life, including death, and I decided I might as well live, and live as gratefully as I could. Every day’s a gift and I don’t want to waste it in either cynicism or self pity.”

George describes a ritual that is part of his daily life. “I am struck by the simple fact that my day goes better when I begin it by pausing for a moment to let myself feel astonished. I wonder that there is a day at all, that there is a me to live it. I am amazed that there is anything at all, that there is a me at all—even a depressed and faithless me. And if I’m lucky, this sense of amazement is sustained by gratitude.”⁶

Gratitude is not the only option in responding to life, but if we want to live life to its fullest, it’s the best choice we can make. Gratitude is born of maturity, a ripening of spirit, an aging of soul. May God grant us the grace to grow deep in faith and to be grateful.

¹ Joan Chittister, OSB, *The Monastic Way*, Erie, PA: Benetvision, November 2006.

² Erma Bombeck, *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise: Children Surviving Cancer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 56-57.

³ Alan Jones and John O'Neil, *Seasons of Grace: The Life-Giving Practice of Gratitude* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), p. 133.

⁴ Chittister, Ibid.

⁵ Jones and O'Neil, *ibid*, p. 131.

⁶ Jones and O'Neil, *ibid*, p. 4.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA