

28th Sunday Ordinary Time 2019
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“Mummum, would you like some more roast beef?”

It was Mother’s Day, decades ago. I was home in Pennsylvania, and after church my mom and I drove to the nursing home to pick up my grandmother, Mummum Renninger.

She was in her mid-90’s. Dementia had been part of her life for years, and we were experiencing that long, painful goodbye which happens when a loved one begins to lose memories and names.

Sometimes, she recognized us. Other times, she just smiled. But, no matter what you did for her, she always said “thank you.”

We drove her home, and during lunch we discovered that dementia had *not* taken away her appetite! Eventually, I asked, “Mummum, would you like some more roast beef?” She agreed to another slice... and some more mashed potatoes!

I fixed her plate, and the conversation at the table resumed. Then Mummum smiled at us and said: “I don’t know who any of you are, but I sure am having a good time with you today!”

We all laughed.

Then Mummum said, “You seem like such nice people. Thank you!”

We laughed, but there were tears in our eyes. There was so much that she had forgotten. And yet, she always remembered to say, “Thank you.”

This woman - who grew up on a small farm, and raised many of her children during the Depression. She worked hard her whole life and buried her husband. Now she had forgotten so much. But she always said thank you.

Even when she did not know her own name, she knew to be grateful.

I think it’s safe to say that most of the world’s spiritual traditions speak of the necessity of gratitude, the transformative power of gratitude, and how easy it is for human beings to lose sight of gratitude.

Gratitude is crucial in many religious traditions. But we Catholics belong to a religious tradition which has made gratitude *the* central act of worship, and *the* supreme form of prayer.

Think about it: what sacrament do we celebrate every weekend? We celebrate *Eucharist*. It is our supreme act of worship, and it's the sacrament in which we experience the real presence of our Risen Lord.

Eucharist. And what does that word mean in Greek? "Eucharist" means – *thanksgiving*. It means *gratitude*.

When I was growing up, I was taught that we have a "Sunday obligation" to participate in the Eucharist. Were you taught that too? Think about what you were learning. You were being taught that, for at least one hour every Sunday, you have an *obligation* to be grateful, to express thanksgiving.

(Or as my mother might have said, you had an obligation and opportunity to spend at least one hour in which you stopped your whining, took your focus off of yourself, stopped taking things for granted, stopped fretting over what you don't have, and simply said to God: "Thank you.") For one hour. Every Sunday. We have an obligation to enact our gratitude.

Let's try a little ritual experiment:

+ The Lord be with you.

("And with your spirit").

+ Lift up your hearts.

("We lift them up to the Lord").

+ Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

("It is right and just.")

+ "It is truly right and just, our duty and salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks..."

Let's stop right there.

You and I have this 'ritual conversation' at least once a week. It happens as we enter into the most sacred part of our Mass – the Eucharistic prayer. You say your part every week.

Do you mean it?

The priest says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." You say, "It is right and just."

Do you mean it? Do you think about it?

Some Sunday, I'd like to be in the middle of that dialog, and just after the congregation says "It is right and just," I'd like to stop and shout, "WHY? WHY IS IT RIGHT TO GIVE GOD THANKS TODAY? FOR WHAT ARE YOU GRATEFUL? FOR WHOM ARE YOU GRATEFUL? What have you taken for granted recently, and you just now realized that it is right and just to say thanks? Why is it right to thank God today, right now, in *this* moment of your life?"

But the dialog continues. The priest says, "It is truly right and just, our DUTY and SALVATION always and everywhere to give you thanks..."

You hear that every week, but are you LISTENING? Every week, we proclaim that thanking God is the DUTY of every Christian and it leads us to SALVATION. And what is Salvation? It is the healing of everything in us that is broken. Including even the brokenness of Death.

Think about that. We proclaim, each week, that gratitude is more powerful than even Death itself.

How does gratitude save us?

+ Well, to focus on God with prayers Thanksgiving forces me to look at God's grace at work at every moment of my life. Even hard moments. Even sad moments. If I look hard enough, there is something for which to be grateful in every moment.

+ Gratitude makes us humble. When we say 'thank you,' we focus on the God who gives us everything. For high-achieving Americans, there is a temptation to ignore God. We congratulate ourselves as we post our selfies. "Look at what I can do! Pay attention to me! Life is all about me!" No it's not.

If you dedicate yourself to specific prayers of gratitude, you realize that the most important stuff in your life was given to you by the Lord and you don't deserve it. Gratitude helps me to distinguish between what I want and what I need.

+ Gratitude changes the way I treat others, because I am reminded that *they* are a gift in my life.

Have you noticed how impatient we are with one another? We are impatient with those who think differently, who speak a different language, who vote for a different candidate. We are impatient with our spouses, our children, our best friends.

Is that because, in part, we are taking each other for granted? Have we forgotten that every other human being is somehow a gift from God in my life?

What would happen if we took time, every day, to say this prayer: “Lord, thank you for my spouse, because... thank you for my child, because... Thank you for my neighbor, because... thank you that difficult person, because... If we recognize that people are gifts in our lives, wouldn’t we treat them with more reverence?”

+ Gratitude makes us more just, and more compassionate.

How would *you* change, how would the world change, if people of faith prayed the following prayers:

- + Lord, thank you for every unborn child, because...
- + Lord, thank you for every immigrant and refugee...
- + Lord, thank you for every elderly person...
- + Lord, thank you for this planet that your hand has made...
- + Lord, thank you for every person who comes to the door of our church seeking assistance...
- + Lord thank you for my neighbors and even the folks I call my enemies.

In today’s Gospel reading, ten people are healed of a skin disease. But only one, a Samaritan, comes back and says ‘thank you’ to Jesus. Only one.

The other nine may have FELT some gratitude, but only one DID SOMETHING about his gratitude. He went from thanks-giving to thanks-doing. He came back and made sure to do something to show his gratitude.

My grandmother has long since gone to glory, and I trust that she is now seated at the banquet of heaven (perhaps enjoying roast beef and mashed potatoes?). I believe that, when we see Christ face to face, everything is healed, and every memory restored.

I thank God for that hope. And this gratitude helps to shape how I try to live each day.

Because, when I see God face to face for the first time, I don’t want the first words out of my mouth to be, “I’m sorry.”

I want to live my life in such a way, so that, when I finally see God face to face, the first words out of my mouth will be, “Thank you!”