

Grateful Living is Joyful Living

Gratitude, the Sixth Pillar of Joy

By the Rev. Chris Harris and Joe LaVela

This is the sixth in a series of blog posts adapted from The Book of Joy by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and The Dalai Lama, which has been the subject of a Sunday forum series "The 8 Pillars of Joy."

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

"Every day, think as you wake up, 'I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it,' the Dalai Lama has often said." So begins Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama's chapter on the Sixth Pillar of Joy, gratitude. The nature of life, the Dalai Lama says, is impermanence. Against this, gratitude helps us "to catalog, celebrate and rejoice in each day and each moment before they slip through the vanishing hourglass of experience." Gratitude, they say, "is the recognition of all that holds us in the web of life and that has made it possible [for us to] have the moments we are experiencing. Thanksgiving is a natural response to life *and may be the only way to savor it.*" These principles can help:

1. There is ALWAYS something for which we can be thankful.

The mere fact that we are alive is reason enough for gratitude. Each day is a blessing for us to receive. The difficulties we encounter may sometimes obscure this. And, therefore, awareness of the things for which we can be thankful depends in part upon us practicing the First Pillar of Joy, Perspective. Perspective enables us to be sure we see the good along with the bad. In simplest terms, it comes down to nurturing a habit of seeing the glass half-full rather than half-empty. Awareness of what we have, including life itself, will give us a sense of abundance rather than scarcity. But by no means does this mean we should ignore the bad. Acceptance, the Fourth Pillar of Joy, remains critical. We need to see things as they are. But even in the face of troubles and difficulties, we have cause for celebration.

2. Even difficult circumstances give reasons for thanks.

Every moment is precious for the opportunities it presents. Our grateful response to the opportunities that life offers us right now yields joy. And that joy does not depend upon the specifics of what is happening to or around us. On this, the authors cite Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk engaged in Christian-Buddhist interfaith dialogue: "The gift of every moment is the opportunity it offers us. Most often it is the opportunity to enjoy it, but sometimes a difficult gift is given to us and that can be an opportunity to rise to the challenge."

The Dalai Lama was grateful for the opportunities he found in exile. Exile “brought me closer to reality,” he said. “When you are in difficult situations, there is no room for pretense. [Y]ou must confront reality as it is.” Christ teaches us to love our enemies. Buddhism invites us to be thankful for them, referring to our enemies as “our most precious spiritual teachers”.

3. Envy and feelings of entitlement are obstacles to gratitude.

We have a choice: to be collectors of grievances, or counters of blessings. Envy, the authors say, is “a nagging sense of dissatisfaction that effaces joy.” It turns our focus away from what we have and directs it to what we don’t. Similarly, in his book *Giving to God*, Mark Allen Powell, adds that notions of entitlement “are a surefire prescription for joyless living: we find it difficult to appreciate what we have when we think that we are only getting our due, and we find it easy to complain about what we lack when we think we are *not* getting our due.” Here, Humility, the Second Pillar of Joy, can be an antidote.

4. Gratitude has significant positive behavioral and physiological benefits.

The authors cite a number of studies showing wide-ranging benefits of gratitude and grateful behaviors. Grateful people were found in studies to be more empathetic and generous. In other studies, grateful people were found to have had more vitality, to have exercised more, and to be more likely to have made progress on goals they had set for themselves. That last point is important because it confirms that seeing the world with grateful eyes motivates us rather than lulls us into complacency. The joy that that Dalai Lama still was able to find in exile did not in any diminish his efforts to oppose the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Grateful people also reported less stress and fewer physical symptoms. Researchers believe that gratitude may stimulate the hypothalamus (which regulates stress), and the ventral tegmental region (which is part of the reward circuitry that produces pleasure in the brain). Smiling (a natural expression of gratitude) stimulates the response of neurotransmitters serotonin (an antidepressant), dopamine (which stimulates the reward centers) and endorphins (natural painkillers). In a real sense, the science confirms Brother Steindl-Rast’s observation that “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.”

5. Gratitude is embedded in Christian teaching and practice.

Giving thanks for what we’ve been given is a longstanding Judeo-Christian practice. Jesus repeatedly taught us to practice gratitude. We as a matter of practice give thanks (“say grace”) before meals, and attend worship services in order to show and say our thanks. Indeed, the word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word for “Thanksgiving”, and the start of the Liturgy of the Sacrament is headed “The Great Thanksgiving.” Although it has been a while since we were able to hear the BCP Eucharistic Prayers in a service, when we next do have that opportunity, make special note of what the prayers model for us:

Celebrant: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

People: It is right to give him thanks and praise

Celebrant: It is right, and a good and *joyful* thing, *always and everywhere*, to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Practicing Gratitude

A simple, but core, gratitude practice is to, literally, “count your blessings”. Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama’s book recommends “Journaling for Gratitude”. The specific daily practice would be, at the end of each day, to: (1) Close your eyes and recall three things from your day for which you can be thankful, and (2) write them down in a journal. They can, for example, be instances of kindness and generosity you have experienced, a bounteous meal you have eaten, or the instances of natural beauty you have witnessed. Be as specific as you can. When we are grateful for a meal, for example, we can be thankful not only for the food but for those who made it possible –the farmers, the grocers, the cooks.

And try to identify different things each day. (If you find yourself naming the same three things each day, then perhaps you not looking hard enough and may risk taking things for granted.) This practice, when done regularly, can help us to recognize that “most of our good fortune in life comes from others,” and to feel “gratitude and appreciation for all those who have made it possible for you to be you.”

You can also do this practice together with a family or friends, sharing your thanksgivings daily, for example, at mealtime.

For more information about the Pillars of Joy or if you are interested in joining a monthly “Pillars of Joy Group” where we support one another in the daily practices of joy, contact Rev. Chris Harris at charris@christchurchcranbrook.org.