

Title: Thanksgiving 2021
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Years ago, I offered a testimony of thanksgiving about running. I got weepy with the sense of gratitude and *shalom* I knew when running or riding outside. That little testimony was probably self-serving, but the attitude/emotion or intention was honest.

Running, riding or racing was a source of joy, daily purpose, and the place where I sorted things out (or wrote sermons.) In it I stayed healthy and found identity. Admittedly it was an addiction and a source of pride. I loved the swag, the image, the nightly ritual of recording the day's milage and speeds, feeling like an athlete, setting and accomplishing goals, being the old fit guy with the young guns. It was an idol, but it was my idol. And, I clung to the possibility that God's pleasure was experienced out on a country road.

That was taken away this year – at least for now. I am walking, “running” with a brace, swimming, and riding the indoor bike. But the flow, the joy, the freedom is gone. Whatever I'm doing right now is a grind and a reminder about what I can't do.

Sometimes thanksgiving is hard to come by. I'm stuck thinking about what I've lost not what I've gained. I'm profoundly grateful for Sandi, the trauma floor at Christ Hospital, the prayers and concerns of this congregation, and returning to meaningful work. I'm thankful I'm alive to see kids and grandkids today. But I wish thanksgiving came easier. I wish I had a better perspective.

This confluence of events has made me think about how loss is knit into life. Eventually what we love will be taken away. Eventually we're all diminished in some way. Running, riding, and racing is transitory and vain - the frosting not the bread of life. I should be able to let go. (If you're thinking that should be easy, I'd encourage you to imagine a singer who suddenly can no longer sing, an artist who can no longer create, a reader who can no longer read...)

It's easy to get stuck in what's lost.

However, Cicero (the philosopher) wrote that gratitude “is not only the greatest, but is also the parent of all the other virtues.” How then can we know gratitude and keep perspective? Thanksgiving seems essential, how then can we hold to what sustains and not what's transitory?

Thomas Merton said that, “In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.” I can't disagree with that; I'm a relational guy. Strip away work, and all the other stuff, and my life is measured by the quality of my relationships with family, friend and enemy. This last year was a reminder of how deeply blessed I am. Friends rallied around me. Traveled miles to see me. Prayed for me. Gave me space to be me – whatever that would be. I couldn't be more grateful.

One of those friends recently ran the Philadelphia half-marathon. He had a hard day; his hopes and goals were slipping away. It was a grind and he was getting stuck in what's lost. But on a long hill he passed a group of runners pushing a woman in a wheelchair. As it turns out this mother/friend/aunt was suffering from terminal cancer. The family and friends pushing her were wearing shirts that read "she has run a good race, we will push her to the finish." The woman had been a marathoner who wanted to do one last race before she died. The beauty of that image overwhelmed my friend and he squeezed back tears as he found his way back to gratitude.

It seems to me that gratitude is essential to living. It takes practice, it's a discipline, it's part of a healthy spiritual life, and it's communal. Somehow gratitude wants to find expression with others. Gratitude wants to be shared.

So, we come together as a community to share in thanksgiving. We gather because grace is poured out on the many and gratitude is our only honest option. We need one another, we need to push one another up the hill to the finish. I learned in these last months that gratitude is essential and communal.

Tish Harrison Warren puts it his way,

To receive life as a gift is to acknowledge that we do not - and indeed cannot - hold our world together out of our sheer effort, will and strength. Most of the best things in life can only be received and held with open hands... Indeed, understanding all of our existence as a gift allows us to see that we are limited in our own capacity to control the world and yet we are given what we need, day by day

It is hard to imagine life without gratitude.

If we were left to

our own devices,
and our own efforts,
our own abilities,
and our own pride,
we would wither and die.

To live without gratitude is to be left with little but greed, envy, vanity, and all that is vile in us. But Reformed folks know that gratitude is finally all that's asked of us. John Calvin says it this way:

Scripture, too, everywhere reminds us, that we were redeemed from death for this purpose, that we might testify with the tongue, as well as by the actions of the life, our gratitude to God.

The best means...of cherishing in us habitually a spirit of gratitude towards God, is to expel from our minds this foolish opinion of our own ability.

Therefore, dear friends, let us give thanks –

For, thanksgiving is rooted the unassuming, unpretentious, and modest awareness
that all life is a gift and God is the giver. We don't earn or deserve

the good or the bad,

the ugly or the glorious,

the gentle or the indifferent,

the joy or the loss.

But gratitude enables us to hold the gift and weather the loss.

Thanksgiving is essential to all of life.

Amen.