



First United Church of Oak Park

With a Grateful Heart

Psalm 100:1-5

Lydia Mulkey

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There are things in my life for which I struggle to give thanks. You may think I mean things like getting stuck in traffic, spam calls, or the rising cost of living. Those aren't the things. I am the person who gives thanks for the first responders who are working to help the folks in the accident that is making me so late. What I struggle to say thanks for are the things other people call "blessings."

By accident of my birth, I was born to a family with enough money to feed me. I just as easily could have been born one of 42% of people worldwide who face food insecurity.

By accident of my birth, I was born into a family that could afford to put a roof over my head. I just as easily could have been born one of the 582,000 experiencing homelessness in the United States.

By accident of my birth, I was born with freedom of movement and freedom from military violence. I just as easily could have been born in Gaza.

By accident of my birth, I was born to a Christian family in a nation where most people who hold power are Christian, Christian holidays are observed, and Christians do not face discrimination. I just as easily could have been born Muslim or Jewish and face Islamophobia or antisemitism.

By accident of my birth, I was born on soil that has not known war in generations. I just as easily could have been born in Ukraine or Syria or Congo.

I didn't deserve my birth; it just happened to me. The same goes for those born into hunger and war. I do not believe God decides some people should experience food insecurity, homelessness, religious persecution, racism, war, or violence, and God "blesses" others with food and peace. God didn't design the world to be like this. God had a dream that people would love and protect each other, but people chose to be greedy, to hold power over others, to be violent, and to divorce themselves from the natural empathy God placed in our hearts. God didn't choose all of this; people did. That's why it feels strange to say, "thank you God for giving me enough and not giving enough to them." Finding it difficult to know what to say about the accidents of our birth or to call them blessings comes from a sense of empathy. It comes from knowing that we are not where we are because we are better or more worthy of good things. It comes from knowing we could just as easily be in their shoes. It's okay to struggle to say "thank you" out of empathy for those who don't have what we have.

When I am at my best, I do come to my full plate and my safe and cozy home with a grateful heart, but not only for me and mine. I am grateful when anyone is safe and fed. I pray that all people would be fed, housed, and safe so that I could be among them. I pray not for my family to have more than my neighbors near and far, but that all my neighbors would have enough so that my family could be among those who have enough.

I'm grateful for the accidents of my birth, but I think it's dangerous territory to lean too heavily into the idea of them being "blessings." I think when we talk about blessings, we do best to focus on those things we all have access to and those things that lead to God's world being the way God intended it to be and to those things that are eternal. I think empathy is a blessing. I think the ability to grieve for and work to change my neighbors' lot in life is a blessing. You may think that if I empathize with the terrible circumstances of others, I will turn into a sad, miserable person. Psychology and brain research tell us otherwise. Perspective taking and the imagination required to have empathetic concern with another are positively correlated with gratitude. Additionally, gratitude and empathy use the same processes in the brain. Gratitude and empathy are both shown to decrease loneliness, sadness, and other uncomfortable emotional experiences.

Empathy is available to us regardless of where we are, who we are, or what we have. That's a blessing.

The practice of gratitude is also available to us regardless of where we are, who we are, or what we have. That is also a blessing.

God's love and faithfulness is available to us regardless of where we are, who we are, or what we have. That is the greatest blessing of all.

On this weekend of gratitude, I challenge you to go beyond the standard prayer of thanks. Yes, we are grateful for health and wealth. Yes, the food on our plate and the roof over our heads is a wonderful thing. But, what are the eternal things for which you can give thanks? What are the things that create the world God dreams? What are the things that are more than an accident of our birth, but are the truest and best of God's gifts? May we give joyful thanks for those gifts today and always.

Amen.