



## “Going Deep: Preventive Gratitude”

Jonah 2:1-10

August 16, 2020

One of my favorite TED Talks, well worth fifteen minutes of your time, was delivered by a ninety-year-old Benedictine monk named David Steindl-Rast. The topic of his speech is gratitude, particularly the interaction between happiness and gratefulness. He begins by debunking the assumption that happy people are the ones who are grateful, pointing out that we all know folks who should be happy based on any objective observation and yet, somehow seem constitutionally unsatisfied. On the other hand, most of us know people whose lives have been difficult and filled with misfortune and yet they radiate an inner light of happiness and joy. Steindl-Rast explains this paradox by turning our assumption on its head. It is not happiness that makes us grateful, he says. It is gratitude that makes us happy.

According to Steindl-Rast, gratitude comes when something is given to us that has deep value for us. Each part of this statement is important. What is received must be truly valuable, truly meaningful. And, it must be truly received as a gift. Not purchased, earned, acquired, or deserved. Not something we have worked to receive. Freely given. When that happens, gratitude comes spontaneously...and happiness is its companion.<sup>1</sup>

It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratitude that makes us happy. This is, I believe, a distinction with a potentially transformative difference. What I mean is this. Most of us assume that the level of contentment we enjoy in this life is determined by factors beyond our control. This is true, I think if we limit ourselves to happiness. Happiness is a mirage on the horizon, always just out of reach, fleeting, and temporary. Happiness is surface-level. But gratitude. Gratitude is deep. Gratitude is made of something sturdier and more lasting. And here's the good and hopeful news: gratitude is a choice.

The Apostle Paul is in prison and he writes to the Philippians: “I thank my God every time I remember you.” He *chooses* gratitude over bitterness, thankfulness over fearfulness. Gratitude is a choice.

Jonah is in the belly of the fish and he prays to God. It's a prayer of thanksgiving. Extraordinary. Gratitude is a choice.

Jonah's prayer takes the form of a psalm, a song of thanksgiving to the almighty God for the gift of undeserved deliverance. Aldous Huxley's poem “Jonah” includes this captivating and incongruous image, “Seated on the convex mound of one vast kidney, Jonah prays and sings his canticles and hymns, making the hollow vault resound God's goodness and mysterious ways, till the great fish spouts music as he swims.”

Jonah sings God's praise from the belly of the fish, and the fish joins the chorus. I'm sure it was a whale of a performance! Paul expresses joyful gratitude from a prison cell. What are we to make of these paradoxical proclamations? How might they shape our living in this moment?

For one thing, we learn from the witness of these flawed fellow human beings that crisis brings clarity. The belly of the fish, it turns out, is a good place to focus. What else is Jonah to do? And, when he is given the unwelcome gift of underwater quarantine, the terrifying three days of retreat from the real world, Jonah discovers the words he most needs to speak are words of prayer and praise. Locked up and exiled, prevented from the missionary work to which he'd been called, Paul is determined to focus on gratitude. In crisis, we are offered clarity. What matters most? What endures? In what ways do we want to invest the energy and time that we have been given?

On Tuesday morning, I woke up way too early. After I finally gave up on the hope of a few more hours of sleep, I tiptoed down the hall and sat down in the room that has been serving as our home office since mid-March. I resisted reading emails and began to look through pictures on my phone and decided to scroll back to March. In some ways, it was like returning to a previous life. A picture of a large family gathered in the parlor before the celebration of baptism, even one of me holding the baby. Photos of Ben's third birthday on March 10th when his brother dressed up like Olaf from *Frozen* to deliver his gifts. But there were no pictures of the party scheduled for March 14th, the first of many canceled plans. There was a tenderness, an emotional reaction to scrolling through these pictures. I thought about all we didn't know when they were taken that we do know now, all that we've learned in these months. We're all aspiring epidemiologists for one thing, with new vocabulary words and scientific insight—perhaps not as much as we pretend, but the learning curve has been steep! There's something else, though, far more important than the information we've acquired. At our best, we've learned how interdependent we are, how strong are the ties that bind us. We've learned that we can do hard things when we do them together. We've learned the precious gift of a hug, a handshake, a hospital visit, a human touch, a broad smile. We've learned, perhaps, to slow down a bit and take in the abundant gifts that surround us. We've found, I think, a renewed focus on what has always mattered most. Relationships. Connection. Opportunities to serve. Grace, freely offered and gratefully received. It sounds strange perhaps, but the most powerful emotion that overcame me on Tuesday morning was gratitude. It swept into the room like a breeze through an open window and I sat in it for nearly an hour until the house began to stir with life. Gratitude.

In the middle of those pictures was the screenshot of a poem a friend sent me on March 18th, the day it was written. The poet is Lynn Ungar and the title is *A Letter in Return*, written in response to a question the poet received.

*And how do you live?*

With grief. With fear. With laughter.  
With boredom. With glee. With contentment.  
With fury. With hope.  
With the firm conviction that no thing  
cancels any other thing out.  
Death does not cancel life.  
Grief does not cancel joy.  
Fear does not cancel conviction.  
Nor any of those statements in reverse.

Make your heart a bowl  
that is large enough to hold it all.  
Imagine that you are the potter.  
Stretch the clay. Cherish the turning wheel.  
Accept that the bowl  
is never going to be done<sup>ii</sup>

Crisis offers clarity. We can choose how to shape this time we've been given. We can choose gratitude, even when it is difficult.

There is another message, I think, in Jonah's prayer of gratitude from the belly of the fish. It is this: we must not wait to give thanks. Please note that Jonah lifts his voice in praise of God's deliverance *before* he has experienced that deliverance. If that is not hope, I don't know what is! I want to call it *prevenient gratitude*, that is, gratitude that comes before the gift but anticipates its arrival. Prevenient gratitude.

It makes me think of baptism. In baptism, we celebrate that we belong to God, are claimed by God without condition or reservation. One reason that we Presbyterians baptize babies is because we want to make this point clear. You don't belong to God because you are so smart or faithful, because you are good, because of what you've earned or accomplished. Baptism is prevenient gratitude for all that will follow. And so, when I baptize an infant, I share the promise of scripture, that we love because God loved us first.

We do not have to wait to be grateful until all is right in our lives or the world around us. We don't need to pause our gratitude until we're safe and sound

on dry land. We can give thanks from the belly of the fish because we know the God to whom we belong is a God of grace and deliverance. We can give thanks because we have been claimed for lives of meaning and purpose by the calling word of God. We can give thanks because we belong to God no matter what circumstance we face. We can give thanks.

In fact, we *must* give thanks. Not because God needs our praise but because we will be shaped by the words we speak, the values we practice, the tone and tenor of what we allow to permeate our hearts and souls. In crisis, we can find focus not on the dismal circumstances that surround us but on the promise of God that sustains us. And so, with a voice of thanksgiving, we can lift praise to God as that praise shapes us into grateful people.

I am *not* saying that this is easy. We're all Jonah. For all of us, there are moments when we forget, when we resist, when we find ourselves in deep waters, swallowed up by the ubiquity of bad news, overwhelmed by it all. What I am saying is that we can grow toward gratitude. I am saying we can be proleptic in our praise, thanking God for the grace and mercy that are sure to come. And I am saying that this gratitude will have the effect of shaping us as surely as the potter shapes the clay. Such gratitude is a spiritual practice.

It begins by remembering the truth of who we are, a truth first spoken to us at our baptisms. You are a beloved child of God. You belong to the God who created you in love. Jonah has been running from God and resisting God's call. And then, crisis comes. Seated on that vast kidney, Jonah discovers a truth he's always known but never understood. Jonah, you belong to God. God is with you. And so, he gives thanks. What else could he do?

Last year in Lent, our sanctuary choir sang Michael Horvit's extraordinary anthem, *Even When God Is Silent*. It is a deeply moving piece made much

more so by the story behind it. The text is a poem found by Allied troops written on the walls of a basement in Cologne, Germany, written by someone hiding there from the Gestapo:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.  
I believe in love even when feeling it not.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.

Prevenient gratitude. Thankfulness that anticipates a gift not yet experienced. It has the power to shape our lives and form in us deeper faith. You belong to God. No matter what. Even from the belly of the fish, sing praise to God. Be grateful. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_steindl\\_rast\\_want\\_to\\_be\\_happy\\_be\\_grateful/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful/transcript?language=en)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/a-letter-in-return/>