



If you're a Facebook user as I am, you may have "friends" who post a "Daily Gratitude" at this time of year; perhaps you do that yourself – think of one or more thing every day for which you are grateful. It can be a good reminder of "life's holy times," and all that makes our personal world wonderful.

The first time I experienced this practice on Facebook was about three years ago, towards the end of the summer after I had retired from "settled" parish ministry. I began reading postings in which people would list three things every day for which they were grateful; and while it was lovely to read these, it also reminded me of the many times I'd tried to set aside a few moments at the beginning or end of each day to reflect on the blessings in my life, and the number of times I'd stopped the practice after only two or three days of it; I'd just keep forgetting! I was a complete failure at it.

And then suddenly one morning, there was a posting from my younger sister in Connecticut, in which at the end of *her* first listing of three "gratitudes," she "nominated" her two sisters – that would be me and our other sister in L.A. – to take on this challenge, and to "nominate" two of our Facebook "friends."

Frankly, I was annoyed; how was I supposed to ignore this, since all of her Facebook Friends – and maybe mine, too (I still don't fully understand who sees what on Facebook!) – would now know whether I was grateful for anything or not! And I *definitely* wasn't about to "nominate" anyone else, and force *them* to join in! (I did wonder why she skipped our two brothers to this challenge – something for which they could feel thankful right off the bat!)

However, I basically *do* think that remembering all the blessings in life is an important daily practice – especially for those of us privileged enough to live in comfortable surroundings, with reasonably safe streets to walk and plenty of food to eat; and maybe this Facebook experiment would discipline me enough to keep it going! So I stepped up to the "challenge" – sort of.

After acknowledging that I was going to be a bit of a curmudgeon, I wrote: "I'm grateful that I live in a country and a family where I can choose to only accept half of a challenge. I will try to remember to sign in to Facebook every day to list 3 new Gratitudes," I wrote; "but just as I don't participate in chain letters/emails; I also won't be 'nominating' anyone else for the 'challenge!'"

It was pretty easy to come up with Gratitudes the first couple of days: I was grateful to have two adult children who, I said, "are smart, make me laugh, and challenge my assumptions." I was grateful to have two "amazing grandchildren who keep me on my toes." And I was grateful to be able to retire, and to have been given *four* retirement parties, etc., etc.

But then it began to get a bit more difficult. Because you see, I actually wasn't feeling particularly grateful around that time – which is probably why I felt so grumpy about participating in this "challenge" in the first place!

While I had been looking forward to retirement with great excitement for over a year, I wasn't sure now what to *do* with all this new freedom; I was feeling at "loose ends," and I didn't really *like* it!

At the same time, my living room was filled with boxes of stuff from my church office – including 30-years' worth of sermon files – that I now had to figure out what to do with. The retirement to which I'd been looking forward for so long had now given me plenty of time to do tasks that I had no interest in doing!

I'd begun suffering daily headaches that I couldn't continue to blame on "stress," since I seemingly no longer had any stress! But there the headaches were, and no amount of Aleve would make them disappear.

So when my sister issued this Gratitude challenge, I resisted. But I was reminded of my former mother's-in-law admonition to me during and after my marriage to her son: "You must always count your blessings, Anne," she would say; this from a woman who had followed my father-in-law from Jamaica to

America when he promised her he would become a successful lawyer in America. But when she arrived, she learned – as he had painfully already learned, but had failed to inform *her* – that America was *not* the “land of opportunity” that it claimed to be, if one was Black – which he was.

My father-in-law – who was *highly* intelligent – never professionally became more than a custodian, and my mother-in-law a seamstress; they had only one child – my husband, for whom they saved all their money so he could attend a good university and then law school. They never again saw their parents or other family members in Jamaica; their old life was too far away for them to be able to afford to visit.

So my mother-in-law knew something about “counting your blessings” even in the midst of great struggle and sorrow. And this is the thing about Gratitude: Even in difficult times, Gratitude assumes there is *something* that will sustain us – be that God, or Love, or the blue sky above and the earth beneath our feet; something that gives us hope and makes us glad to be alive, *in spite of everything*. And for that we can give thanks.

Now, every year at this time I preach this idea – that life is abundant with blessings, no matter what. And every year, just as I’m beginning to write, something happens to challenge the idea. This year has been especially full of events that have challenged my optimistic assumptions.

Most recently was Friday’s terrorist attacks on a Sufi mosque in Egypt, killing at least 300 people and injuring over 100 more as they were innocently gathered in Friday prayers.

There have been a tragic number of mass shootings in this country – though even one mass shooting is a “tragic” number. The most recent of those took place in another house of worship in Sutherland Spring, Texas; twenty-six of those shot, died.

Hundreds of people have been displaced – and some have died – from hurricanes, floods and fires around our country; many of them had no homes in which to celebrate Thanksgiving this year, nor will life return to “normal” for them for a long time to come – especially in Puerto Rico.

Wars and torture continue around the world, and our country insists now on turning away those who would seek refuge.

And then there’s the almost-daily string of outrageous decisions coming out of the White House and Congress these days – decisions that will most likely result in heart-breaking consequences on the lives of so many people, particularly the poor and middle class, people of color, immigrants, the elderly, BGLTQ folks – oh my, the list just goes on and on.

And a voice inside me keeps saying, “*Really?! You’re gonna’ suggest that those people in Egypt whose loved ones were killed by terrorists should ‘count their blessings’ now?! And the families of the victims of mass shootings in this country? What about the victims of violent weather and fire storms; or simply of a mean-spirited government? What ‘blessings’ can any of them possibly experience in this moment?!’*”

Some people would respond by saying that those killed from violence are now “in a better place.” That would be nice, but I don’t really believe it.

Some would say that “everything happens for a reason,” as if some force in the Universe causes even tragedies in order that something good might come from it, or that we might learn some much-needed “lesson;” but I don’t believe that – though often we *do* learn and grow from loss, and sometimes good *does* evolve out of tragedy; but I think that’s a byproduct, not a cause.

Nor do I believe that “God (or Life) never gives us anything we can’t handle” – because sometimes life does. Sometimes people never heal from a tragic situation; sometimes they never get to the other side.

And yet...and yet – many survivors of violence and of natural disasters report having their hope restored by the incredible kindness and generosity offered not only by people they know, but also by complete strangers reaching out to them.

And an article in Thursday’s *New York Times* shared stories of people impacted by some of these recent national tragedies – some understandably so overcome still with grief that they said they could not celebrate a day of Gratitude. Yet others, according to the article, saying “they needed this Thanksgiving more than any other, and welcomed the opportunity...to find a few moments of gratitude and grace.”

Said the wife of the pastor of that Baptist church in Sutherland Spring, Texas, where their teenage daughter was killed in the mass shooting on November 5<sup>th</sup>: “We’ve got to go on. This is what God has called us to do;” she said this as she and her family prepared a Thanksgiving dinner for the other congregants of the church.

Tennessee Williams said that, “To snatch the eternal from the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence.” This is what the pastor’s wife was doing when serving a Thanksgiving dinner to her congregation in the midst of her deep grief, and theirs: Offering a glimpse of the Eternal in the midst of their desperation.

And it’s what the victims of tragedy everywhere most often experience from friends and strangers alike – a glimpse of the Holy Spirit of Love in response to the unimaginable. Surely it doesn’t diminish the awfulness of their experience; but it may provide comfort and possibly even some courage. Perhaps it helps them sense that their God has not abandoned them, but is embracing them -- weeping alongside them.

Most of us will probably never experience such unimaginable tragedy, fortunately. But we *all* experience, at various times in our lives, loss and struggle, and deep sorrow. And I *do* believe that *most* of the time, we *do* come through such loss or struggle. I have seen it; I have experienced it.

Perhaps this *is* one of the miracles of life. I don’t know how it happens, but we humans are amazingly resilient. We may pray; we may weep; we may say we can’t go on. But through it all we most often seem to be able to hold in our heart – even without knowing it – the faith that some day we will experience again the wonderfulness of the world – of life itself – even though there may always be an emptiness that didn’t exist before.

Perhaps this is what a faith community such as this church does for someone as they find their way through their grief – we hold on to that faith *for* them until they are ready to reclaim it. And once they do, we and they celebrate our gratitude to life, and to that Love which is always with us.

And so, when my sister posed the Facebook “Gratitude Challenge,” I shared every day for a week three Gratitudes. And on the last day of the challenge, I wrote my final three: I was – and still am – grateful to my younger sister, Judith, for urging me to be ever-mindful of the riches that grace my life; I was – and still am – grateful to be living in a time, place, and situation that allows me the luxury to think of 21 different reasons to be grateful; and I was – and still am – grateful for the gifts of life and love.

A few years earlier, while spending a sabbatical in my sister’s house on Cape Cod, I took my younger sister and her daughter – my niece – to a gift shop in town to show them something that had captured my heart. It was a toy frog with a straw hat on its head and a pink polka-dot tie around its neck; and when you pressed its hand, it sang Louis Armstrong’s recording of “What a Wonderful World.” I was sure they would fall in love with it just as I had.

And they did. Indeed, my sister decided right then and there to buy it for me for my upcoming birthday. When I said, “But I was going to buy it for you!” she replied, “But I probably wouldn’t play it much; *you will.*”

And I do – sometimes just for fun as I walk past it, and sometimes when I’m feeling blue and need reminding of life’s wonderfulness. But I have found that it’s always best to share it with others.

*(Sit frog on pulpit and play.)*

Amen!