

Homily – The Joy of Gratitude

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How many of you have seen the Disney Movie called “Up”? This is a movie about a grumpy old man named Carl who decides he has a goal in life. This grumpy old man feels that his life is empty and that his life has been unfulfilled and as the movie progresses we watch Carl as he moves mountains, or at least his house, to make sure his life doesn't feel empty.

Now, I have had extended times in my life in which I have felt empty. There have been times when I have felt like Carl and I have become obsessed with some meaningless goal that seems so important. The obsession seems so important because I can't stand that empty feeling.

Today's message is for you if you feel sometimes you are a Carl, or that you might live with one.

As Christians we have a cure for this empty feeling to life, and, it is very simple. You can't be a Carl and be thankful at the same time. It is impossible.

Let me repeat that.

You can't feel empty and be thankful at the same time.

I first heard this message several years ago when I was going through my divorce. It was a time filled with gloom and I was in a funk. I had become Carl, and I was so intrigued when I heard this message about moving from emptiness to joy.

So today, during the season of Lent, I want us to look at this link between being thankful to God and having joy.

Now, we live in a culture today that focuses on happiness. If you ask most people what they want most, they respond by saying ‘they want their children or grandchildren to be happy.’ Happiness has become our goal.

However, I want to suggest to you today that the goal for Christians is not happiness. Our goal is joy. I’m talking about that joy that satisfies the deepest hungers in our souls. That joy is so hard to find in our culture today, and we need to shift from a secular goal of happiness to a Christian goal of joy.

Often it is not easy to change our focus. The media inundates us each day. We have complaints and if-only’s. However, we can change to joy if we listen to the words of the Apostle Paul and count our blessings rather than our problems. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul understands the link between being thankful and finding joy, and he wants us to have this joy also. For you see, giving thanks leads to joy because our focus is redirected from our problems to our blessings. Kind of obvious isn’t it.

Few understand that joy is a bi-product. It is a bi-product of gratitude and contentment for the blessings that God has already provided. And, it runs head on with the myth in our culture that happiness is connected with getting what we want in the future. Secular happiness is when we fulfill our wish list, or we wait for our “if-only’s”.

John Lennon said, “life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.” Many of us are waiting in order to be happy. So life and joy never really happen. And, that is a tragedy. That is why even though this link between gratitude and joy is so simple it is also so profound.

Joy happens when we live in a continual state of gratitude as indicated in today's Psalm. "Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed."

We are to be grateful to God and, the time to be thankful is now. Not at some future time when we receive that something that we think will free us to be joyful. Too many of us are caught in the twenty-first century American myth that focuses on problems and wants and greed and fears. And, it is a myth that robs us of the joy God would have us know today.

Henri Nouwen puts it so well. "To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy. But, to grateful for all our lives, the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections. That requires hard spiritual work."

When Christians choose to count blessings rather than problems and unmet desires, we are going to find this soul-filling joy that can be ours today. Particularly today as we walk out into a frightened world where so many people have lost their smile and their hope. I believe that gratitude is one of the best coping mechanisms for these times. And, I give it to you as a choice to accept.

Now I want to acknowledge something that gets in the way of this link between thankfulness and joy.

Many of us desire to have God bless our pocketbook, our paycheck and our savings account. For many our deepest desire is for wealth, but wealth is one of the emptiest feelings in the world. Though we often forget it, we must remember to be thankful for all of our gifts, not just our wealth.

Hanna Rosin writes in the Atlantic Monthly about a common linkage between Christianity and wealth. She writes, though we often deny it, "America's churches always reflect shifts in the broader culture. The

message that Jesus blesses believers with riches first showed up in the postwar years, at a time when Americans began to believe that greater comfort could be accessible to everyone, not just the landed class. But it really took off during the boom years of the 1990s, and has continued to spread ever since. This stitched-together, homegrown theology, known as the prosperity gospel, is not a clearly defined denomination, but a strain of belief that runs through ... a surprising number of mainstream churches, with varying degrees of intensity." (Hanna Rosin, Atlantic, December 1, 2009)

See if you recognize the following common American belief about wealth.

"A Pew survey from a couple of years ago, found that over 25 percent of Christians believe that wealth will be granted to the faithful." A whole lot of Christians believe that wealth is God's reward to good people, and by extension wealth is proof that a person is good.

Now, there are a lot of problems with this form of spirituality. The prosperity gospel ignores the fact that most Christians around the world do not live a life of abundant money. Many good Christians around the world live below the poverty level and they count their blessings in ways other than money.

St. Barnabas is part of the Episcopal Church which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Some of you know that the majority of the eighty million Anglicans are in Africa and my observation is that the Christians of Africa do not seem to be as focused on wealth as we Americans seem to be. Even though they have very different beliefs about the role of women and of gays & lesbians, I am eager to stay connected with our Christian brothers and sisters of Africa, for I believe they have important things to teach American Christians.

We often praise ourselves for the aid we give to our brothers and sisters in Africa. We pat ourselves on the back for our generosity to those who go without. We forget that the African churches have much to offer us in our own impoverishment. We have a type of spiritual impoverishment that

focuses too much on wealth and too little on God. Our African brothers and sisters can help lead us back to a real understanding of God's blessings. They help us see, that our obsession with wealth is a guide to emptiness, the opposite of the state of joy.

Instead of wealth we must remember to be grateful for so many other things. I know the biggest thing to be thankful for is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our list would be complete if we were just thankful for Jesus, but I want to extend this list to help your creative juices about getting thankful.

Here are some other possible things to add to your thank list.

Falling in love.

Hot towels out of a dryer.

A warm shower without a water restrictor.

Lying in bed listening to the rain outside.

The first sip of coffee in the morning.

And, having someone tell you that you are beautiful.

Or, accidentally overhearing someone say something nice about you.

Waking up and realizing you have a few hours left to sleep.

Or, watching the sunrise.

We must remove ourselves from only thinking about wealth and remember all the ways that God has showered us with blessings.

This may sound odd, but I hope you have had an experience like the one I am about to describe.

My 97-year old grandfather died eleven years ago, one day after we came back to California from a visit with him.

This may sound odd, but my deepest feeling about his death is joy. I feel joy because I am grateful to God for the life of my grandfather and the blessing he was to so many people.

I am grateful, that I got to spend time with him right before he died, and I am grateful that our family got to get together to celebrate his life. It is because I am grateful to God that there is this odd sense of joy.

So, do you want to banish a sense of emptiness? Does someone you love need a good jolt of joy? Here are a few practices that will help.

There are so many things to thank God for if we will take the time to look and to think.

Look for the good signs and then say “thank you God.”

And while you are at it, say thank you to a person who has blessed your life. Go out and thank someone.

When we finally understand that every good and perfect gift comes down to us from a very generous God, then it will change our lives, and we will find that soul filling joy. When we stop focusing on wealth we leave behind the cause of much emptiness.

And, we can start being thankful today not tomorrow. I am happy to say that a thankful heart transforms gloomy, empty Carls into contagiously joyful Christians.