

Dr. Kevin Leman wrote a book called THE BIRTH ORDER BOOK, WHY YOU ARE THE WAY YOU ARE. He maintains birth order often predicts accomplishment in life. The first born is the achiever, the middle sibling goes along, and the baby craves and gets all the attention. The oldest and youngest often have a love/hate rivalry. Leman must have been an older brother himself. He says the original title of his book was "ABEL HAD IT COMING." Now you know why gathering with your family at Thanksgiving always has the possibility of fireworks! Differences in sibling performance is at least partly because each sibling is treated a little differently from earlier siblings. One woman said she has 5 siblings, 3 sisters and 2 brothers. One night she said she was chatting with her mother about how her mother had changed over the years from the first child to the last. Her mother agreed she had mellowed a lot. "When your oldest sister coughed or sneezed, I called the ambulance," said her mother. "However, when your youngest brother swallowed a dime, I just told him it was coming out of his allowance." Anne Lamott sums up family this way: "Be thankful that not all the members of your tribe are nuts on the same day!" If you are with your family today, be thankful; if you are NOT with your family today, be thankful. Both are good. Both are holy. And both have the possibility of drawing us closer to God – and to one another.

Three points on gratitude. First, gratitude is the heart of the spiritual life. Retired seminary Professor Fred Craddock says that if an angel had visited him when his 2 children were small and asked what one virtue he would want for them, he would have answered without a doubt the virtue of gratitude. "Make our children grateful," he says. "I have never known a single person who was grateful who was at the same time envious or cruel or hostile or stingy or condescending."

Sir John Templeton, the billionaire investor, was once asked what is the secret of wealth. He said, "Gratitude. If you're not grateful, you're not rich – no matter how much you have." (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2008, p. 61)

And we must start with the fact of existence itself. The poet Denise Levertov speaks of the incredible gift of existence in her poem "PRIMARY WONDER." She stands in awe before "the mystery/that there is anything, anything at all,/ let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,/ rather than void; and that, O Lord,/ Creator, Hallowed One, You still,/ hour by hour sustain it."

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead the stars come out every night, and we watch television. (Brian Doyle, editor, A SENSE OF WONDER, p. 191)

Which brings us to my second point, the problem. Adam and Eve had an entire garden placed before them – but they fixated on one piece of fruit from the one tree when God had given them endless trees with infinite varieties of fruit to enjoy. There's so much to enjoy, and yet we fixate on something we don't have.

David Letterman wrote this piece during the presidency of Republican George W. Bush, and it's just as applicable under our current Democratic president. He was talking about how unhappy the polls tell us with the direction of the country – that 69% of the country is unhappy with the performance of the President. In essence 2/3 of the citizenry just ain't happy and want a change. So Letterman began thinking and wrote this: "What are we so unhappy about?"

- A. Is it that we have electricity and running water 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?
- B. Is our unhappiness the result of having air conditioning in the summer and heating in the winter?

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- C. Could it be that 95.4% of these unhappy folks have a job?
- D. Maybe it is the ability to walk into a grocery store at any time and see more food in moments than Darfur has seen in the last year?
- E. Maybe it is the ability to drive our cars and trucks from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean without having to present identification papers as we move through each state.
- F. Or possibly the thousands of clean and safe motels we would find along the way that can provide temporary shelter?
- G. I guess having thousands of restaurants with varying cuisine from around the world is just not good enough either.
- H. Or could it be that when we wreck our car, emergency workers show up and provide services to help all and even send a helicopter to take us to the hospital.
- I. Perhaps we are one of the 70% of Americans who own a home.
- J. Maybe we are upset with knowing that in the unfortunate case of a fire, a group of trained firefighters will appear in moments and use top notch equipment to extinguish the flames thus likely saving us, our family, and our belongings.
- K. Or if, while at home watching one of our many flat screen TVs, a burglar or prowler intrudes, and we call 911, an officer equipped with a gun and a bullet-proof vest will come to defend us and our family against attack or loss.
- L. This all in the backdrop of a neighborhood free of bombs or militias raping and pillaging the residents. Neighborhoods where 90% of teenagers own cell phones and computers.
- M. How about the complete religious, social and political freedoms we enjoy that are the envy of everyone in the world? Maybe that is what has 67% of us unhappy.

These are Letterman's exact words, and he continues: "Fact is, we are the largest group of ungrateful, spoiled brats the world has ever seen. People around the world see us for what we are. The most blessed people in the world who do nothing but complain about what we don't have, and what we hate about the country instead of thanking God we live here." Perhaps we haven't evolved much from Adam and Eve and that one thing we couldn't have all those years ago in Eden. Whether we were happy – or sad – with the recent election results, Thanksgiving reminds us to stop and say a prayer of thanks that we are here in these United States. As I have said many times, we all won the lottery simply by being here. Shouldn't that be enough?

Third, gratitude is a decision. It's a choice. We can focus on what we have – or what we don't. As disciples of Christ, we first give thanks for the very fact that we are alive – that we have been given this one wonderful life. This is a miracle we could never have asked for – or even imagined. We also thank God for the ordinary miracles of daily life. Writer Wendell Berry says the miraculous is 'our daily bread': the stars, the ocean, lilies, apples, owls, the fall foliage. He calls Jesus' turning of water into wine "a very small miracle," adding, "We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (and soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes which can then be turned into wine." Which reminds me of Hillaire Belloc's marvelous little poem: "Where'er the Catholic sun doth shine/ There's food, laughter and rich, red wine. At least I've always heard it so, benedicamus Domino." (Let us bless the Lord)

We are also grateful that God is a God of love – a love expressed in specific blessings – the mystery of existence, and ordinary daily miracles, yes. But it is above all shown through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ.

When we experience difficult times and are tempted to think we have nothing to be grateful for, it is good to recall that, at the Last Supper, right before Jesus was arrested, unjustly tried, brutally tortured, and executed, He was filled with gratitude. His gratitude was rooted not in the outward circumstances of His life –

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which were horrific – but in His personal relationship with a God He knew and trusted as “abba.” Ultimately the source of our gratitude is simply WHO GOD IS, not our external circumstances at any given moment.

And there’s more. Gratitude has immense transformational power. It fosters attentiveness and reverence for all that is. It bestows peace, eases relationships, and facilitates community. Gratitude humbles; it also uplifts. Because God is who God is, we can make the psalmist’s words our own: “Give thanks to the Lord who is good, whose love endures forever.” (Ps 107:1) (adapted from LIVING WITH CHRIST, Nov 2009, p. 20-21)

Life is a gift, totally given to us without cost, every day of it, and every part of it. A daily and chosen attitude of gratitude will keep our hands open to expect that life, allow that life, and receive that life at ever-deeper levels of satisfaction – but never to think we deserve it. Those who live with such open and humble hands receive life’s “gifts, full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over into their lap” (as Luke’s gospel reminds us (6:38)).

We have to always remember that our gifts are never our own; they are borrowed. We are moons, not suns, except in our ability to pass on the light. Our life is not our own; yet, at some level, enlightened people know that their life has been given to us as a sacred trust. It means to live in gratitude and confidence, and try to let the flow continue through us. Gratitude leads to humility and loving service to others – the only appropriate responses we can make for all that God has given us. Our monetary gifts to our collection today for Brown Bag ministry, our presents for the Christmas Wish Tree are but 2 opportunities to let this giftedness flow through us to others. (adapted from Rohr, posting of 20 November 2022)

Third, and finally, there is a story told about a servant whose master died and left him a bag full of blessings. The master left a message for the servant telling him that the bag would always be full as long as he remembered 3 magic words. The servant went out and immediately began using the blessings which filled the bag. Soon the bag was almost empty. The servant recalled the words of his master that the bag would always be full as long as he remembered the 3 magic words. Unfortunately, the servant had forgotten the 3 magic words and was almost out of blessings. Finally, he went to a wise man and asked his advice on the matter. The wise man suggested that possibly the 3 magic words were: I WISH FOR. “I wish for this. I wish for that.”

The servant tried using the words suggested by the wise man. He tried thinking of all the things he wanted. “I wish for this. I wish for that. I wish for something else.” But the bag was not replenished.

Now he became quite concerned. He approached a person who happened to be passing him on the street. He told him the story. He asked his advice on the matter. The stranger suggested, “Well maybe the 3 magic words are GIVE ME MORE.”

So the servant continued his journey and kept saying, “Give me more. Give me more. Give me more.” But the bag was now almost totally empty.

In despair, he sat down, lonely and dejected. He took a piece of bread out of his pack and began to eat it. A hungry child off of the street, alone and abandoned, approached him and asked him for the bread. It was obvious the child was in desperate need. So, without even thinking about it, the servant gave the child his bread. Before the child ate, though, he folded his hands and said a blessing, “Thank you Lord.”

All of a sudden, the servant’s eyes lit up and he started dancing around the street. He began chanting loudly: “That’s it. That’s it. The 3 magic words: ‘Thank you Lord.’” Soon the bag was filled with blessings once again. (adapted from FOUR MAGIC WORDS, in DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2018, p. 43)

Never forget the 3 magic words. Never forget the 3 magic words. And so we sing: THANK YOU LORD.....

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