

So I was at Harris-Teeter this week. A lady was looking at the frozen turkeys, but she couldn't find one big enough. She asked the stock boy, "Do these turkeys get any bigger?" He replied with a straight face, "No ma'am, they're dead." Made my week!

When the famous actress Helen Hayes cooked her first turkey for Thanksgiving, she called her husband and son together and said, "Now I know this is the first turkey I've ever cooked. If it isn't right, I don't want anybody to say a word. We'll just get up from the table without comment, put on our hats and coats, and go downtown to a restaurant." She then went into the kitchen to get the turkey. When she returned to the table, her husband and son were standing there with their hats, gloves, and coats already on.

And I DO have 1 great suggestion for your Thanksgiving Dinner conversation – BRING UP POLITICS! It'll save you a pile of money on Christmas gifts!

Three thoughts on gratitude and thanksgiving. First, a line from Jesus in Luke's Gospel: "To whom much is given, much is required." (Lk 12:48) We could consider this quote the Christian equivalent of what Hindus and Buddhists call 'karma.' Reversing modern slang, "What comes around, goes around." What we send out eventually comes back to us. Send out good, good comes back. Send out bad, stinginess, negativity, and that's what comes back to us.

In the world of grace, mercy and goodness, these things must flow forward, through, and toward something or someone else – or the channel becomes blocked. Negative energy and intention produce a negative energy response – usually quite quickly. We clamp on to it like Velcro. In contrast, positive energy and intention produce positive energy outflow – if not now, eventually.

We usually do not recognize or appreciate all that we have been given gratuitously (the 'free flow'). You've heard me say repeatedly that we all won the lottery just by being here in the United States. What more could we ever ask for? Instead, we often concentrate on how we have been offended, or got the short end of the stick, or felt left out. The negative rebound that we send back to another is almost instant – and often not even recognized as negative energy on our part. We need to work and pray for most of our lives to recognize and resist this game. Negative karma is much more powerful than positive. How rarely do we cherish a compliment we receive – but we can brood over a snarky comment or slight for months – even years! You know what Irish Alzheimer's is? When you forget everything BUT the grudge!

While karma is not primarily monetary, we must honestly say karma applies to money, as well. Our attitudes toward earning, giving, losing, and receiving money are about as good a measure for our giving and receiving of love as anything I know. The opposite is also true. Stingy with love, stingy with money. Generous with love, generous with money. Wary and unwilling to take risks with love, wary and unwilling to take risks with money. In a general sense, we are either flow people or dam (!) people. That's dam spelled d-a-m! Like Hoover Dam! Although for cheap people, the other spelling works too!

Jesus taught from a karmic worldview. "You cannot pick grapes from thorns or figs from thistles. A good tree will bear good fruit," He said, "And a bad tree will bear bad fruit." (Mt 7:17-18). Jesus also said, "If you show mercy, mercy will be shown to you" (Mt 5:7; Lk 6:37) and "The measure you measure with, will be measured back to you." (Mk 4:24).

Jesus sought to create a deep sense of personal choice, responsibility, and freedom in the here and now, and not just disconnected payoffs in the afterlife. But we have understood much of the gospel in terms

of divine threats and afterlife rewards – a delayed schedule of merits and demerits. This deeply distorted the gospel’s message of transformation.

I believe Jesus teaches that rewards and punishments for behavior are INHERENT AND NOW, and only by KARMIC implication are they external and later. Karma, rightly understood, creates responsible, self-actualized people instead of fear-based people. Threats of punishment or promises of candy later create perpetual adolescents and well-disguised narcissism at every level of Christianity. (adapted from Rohr, “ALLOWING THE FLOW,” posting of 10 November 2023. We have to do better than this.

Second, Gratitude is a practice. Kristi Nelson shares her story of learning to embrace gratitude as a way of life. She writes: “At 33 years old, I was diagnosed with stage IV Hodgkin’s lymphoma that had metastasized to my spine. After going through 18 months of hospitalizations, surgeries, chemotherapy, and treatments, I asked my oncologist, “When will I be out of the woods?” He answered, “You will never be out of the woods.” Having worked so hard to stay alive, I had not grasped the degree of uncertainty and struggle that would come with being a survivor. Understanding that my life would only ever be lived with the caveat of ‘for now’ was sobering. I wondered so many things: How do I continue to live this way? What am I able to count on?.....How do I live – while expecting to die?

“The first few years of uncertainty and remission put the blessings of my life in sharp relief. I was in *super-soak* mode – every experience was saturated with new meaning, and I was absorbing it all fully. I did not know any other way to live the moments I had than to greet each one as gratefully as I could. Not sure how much more time was mine, I was awestruck by every moment, every person, and every thing. Being grateful the first few years was relatively easy and revelatory. I would wake up in a room bathed in light, hear birds singing, and notice I was still breathing.....I could put both feet on the floor and walk freely to a kitchen where I could make a cup of tea. It was enough to make me start each day with tears of joy. Being alive was enough.

“But over time, all those amazing reasons to feel grateful joined the ranks of the taken-for-granted. I got healthy and busy. I began chasing goals and the fulfillment they promised. I martyred myself to a job, complained about things like traffic, my weight, and colds. I ruthlessly compared myself to others, succumbed to needless shopping and debt, and suffered from stress. Each year that passed, I built up a kind of gratitude tolerance – what used to be enough got left in the dust in the pursuit of having more. Having cheated death, I began cheating life.

“After some challenging years, dramatic wake-up calls, and my share of spiritual suffering, I came to realize that maintaining a grateful perspective is a true practice.....This capacity for grateful perspective is a muscle I needed to build and use, and it is still something I need to nurture and tend daily....The practice of looking at the world through grateful eyes with a grateful heart is an exquisite end in itself.” (adapted from Kristi Nelson, WAKE UP GRATEFUL: THE TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE OF TAKING NOTHING FOR GRANTED, p 1-3)

And finally, two worldviews. The first is capitalism, which is based on quid pro quo, reward and punishment, and justice as retribution. This much product requires this much payment. But this approach quickly becomes the framework for our relationships, our basic self-image, and actions (“I deserve.” “You owe me.” “I will be generous if it helps me, too.”), and constructs a faulty foundation for all our relationships, including with God.

We've got to admit that this system of exchange seems reasonable to almost everybody today. If we're honest, it makes sense to us, too, and seems fair. I'm not going to say it's wrong – it does much good. The only trouble is, Jesus doesn't believe it at all, and He's supposed to be our spiritual guide and teacher.

What Jesus presents is a gift economy. In a gift economy, there is no equivalence between what we give and how much we get. We don't really like this model, because we feel we've worked hard to get 'what's ours,' and that we deserve the good things we have. We feel we have earned our rightful social positions.

Yet if we call ourselves Christians, we deal with a gospel of grace. The only way we can actually understand this is if we've had at least one experience of being loved without earning it. If we've been forgiven when we didn't deserve it, loved when we weren't worthy of it, and treated mercifully when we could have been punished, then we know something of grace. It's all about forgiveness, unconditional love, generosity, and mercy. If we've never experienced any of these things, we will stay in the capitalist worldview where $2 + 2 = 4$. I put in my 2, I get my 2 back. But that means we are often uncomfortable, even angry, about anything 'free,' whether it is free health care (physical, mental, or spiritual), a stranger's kindness, or even free education. These benefits can be seen as natural human rights that sustain people's humanity and dignity, as the church's social encyclicals make clear. All too often, though, we only want people in our own group to benefit from health care, education, and bail outs. I have often heard people who have second homes complain about welfare queens and how they suck up government money – as they sit in their 2nd home, insured with government subsidized insurance.

The bottom line is that we don't 'deserve' anything, anything! It's all a gift. Until we have begun to live in the kingdom of God instead of the kingdoms of this world, we will think exactly like the world. To understand the gospel in its radical, transformative power, we have to stop counting, measuring, and weighing. We have to stop saying 'I deserve' and deciding who does not deserve. None of us deserves! This daily conversion is hard to do unless we've experienced infinite mercy and realize that it's all a gift – all the time. (adapted from Richard Rohr, "Capitalist Economy and Gift Economy," homily, September 1, 2019)

And we HAVE all experienced this, whether we realize it or not. None of us could ever DESERVE to be born, or deserve heaven, or make ourselves worthy of heaven. But life was given to us without our asking, and heaven is offered to us through the mystery of Christ's infinite love for us, poured out with His blood upon the cross.

Which immediately makes us want to share this life and love – and everything else – with everyone else. Or we didn't 'get it' in the first place! It truly is – infinitely more than we could ask for – or even imagine. Which makes for a VERY HAPPY THANKSGIVING EVERY DAY OF OUR LIVES! Amen!