

“All that is left is Gratitude”
A Sermon by
Rev. Frieda Gillespie

The poor man had come to the end of his rope. So he went to his rabbi for advice.

“Holy Rabbi!” he cried. “Things are in a bad way with me, and are getting worse all the time! We are poor, so poor, that my wife, my six children, my in-laws, and I have to live in a one-room hut. We get in each other’s way all the time. Our nerves are frayed, and, because we have plenty of troubles, we quarrel. Believe me—my home is a hell and I’d sooner die than continue living this way!”

The rabbi pondered the matter gravely. “My son,” he said, “promise to do as I tell you and your condition will improve.”

“I promise, Rabbi,” answered the troubled man. “I’ll do anything you say.”

“Tell me—what animals do you own?”

“I have a cow, a goat, and some chickens.”

“Very well! Go home now and take all these animals into your house to live with you.”

The poor man was dumbfounded, but since he had promised the rabbi, he went home and brought all the animals into his house.

The following day the poor man returned to the rabbi and cried, “Rabbi, what a misfortune have you brought upon me! I did as you told me and brought the animals into the house. And now what have I got? Things are worse than ever! My life is a perfect hell—the house is turned into a barn! Save me, Rabbi—help me!”

“My son,” replied the rabbi serenely, “go home and take the chickens out of your house. God will help you!”

So the poor man went home and took the chickens out of his house. But it was not long before he again came running to the rabbi.

“Holy Rabbi!” he wailed. “Help me, save me! The goat is smashing everything in the house—she’s turning my life into a nightmare.”

“Go home,” said the rabbi gently, “and take the goat out of the house. God will help you!”

The poor man returned to his house and removed the goat. But it wasn’t long before he again came running to the rabbi, lamenting loudly, “What a misfortune you’ve brought upon my head, Rabbi! The cow has turned my house into a stable! How can you expect a human being to live side by side with an animal?”

“You’re right—a thousand times right!” agreed the rabbi. “Go straight home and take the cow out of house!”

And the poor unfortunate hastened home and took the cow out of his house.

Not a day had passed before he came running again to the rabbi.

“Rabbi!” cried the poor man, his face beaming. “You’ve made life sweet again for me. With all the animals out, the house is so quiet, so roomy, and so clean! What a pleasure!”

The moral of this story might be something like “Things could be worse!” It also tells us something we already know from experience – that pleasure and pain are relative. Benedict Spinoza defines pleasure and pain as a change from one state to another. Pleasure is a transition from a feeling of less power to one of greater power, and pain a change from a greater sense of

power to a lesser one. This is true for physical as well as emotional pain and pleasure. It is the difference that we feel not the absolute strength of the pleasure or pain. The greater the difference, the greater the joy or sorrow. The question I'm wondering about today is how much are we like this poor man, bemoaning our fate when we could just as well be enjoying our circumstances given a different perspective.

As part of my seminary training, I served as a Chaplain in a hospital for a school year. The patients I visited were either recovering from surgery or in intensive care for cardiac problems. Most of the patients were elderly. I noticed that there was quite a difference in the ways people responded to their illness or the conditions they'd have to face after surgery. Some were very depressed, some angry, some afraid, some resigned, some matter of fact and some cheerful and hopeful. There were a broad range of responses. What was interesting was that the emotional tone of the person didn't seem to depend on the seriousness of their illness. You'd think it would. You'd expect that a more serious condition would naturally result in more intense negative emotions. It seemed to me as if the people I met were meeting their new challenges or continuing challenges with the same sort of attitudes with which they lived their lives. If they were bitter about their lives, they were bitter about their condition. If they were naturally optimistic, they felt hope and looked for the good that was available to them.

The most striking example of this for me was a man, that I'll call Larry, that I met who was likely to have his foot or leg amputated due to complications from diabetes. He told me that his wife of many years had died two years before and he was still very sad about it. We talked about her, what she was like and what he missed the most. After speaking sadly about her in a loving way for awhile he began to tell me about his cooking. I was a bit taken aback at first as he regaled me with recipe after Italian recipe. I began to worry that he was in denial about his surgery and that this was some elaborate escape from reality.

What I gathered though after a time was that it wasn't until after his wife died that he took up cooking. And not the kinds of cooking so many of us do which is more heating up than cooking. He made meatballs, sauces, pastas, pastries all kinds of foods from scratch using his wife's and his mother's recipes. When she was alive, his wife wouldn't let him into the kitchen practically. That was her domain and she wasn't sharing anything but the final product. Now, this man cooked for himself and his mentally ill grown son who lived with him, often making enough to share with his other son's family as well. He clearly loves it.

If you could only have seen how Larry's face lit up when he began to tell me some of his favorite recipes. He became animated. Through this very existential but soulful act he was linking himself with his wife and his Italian mother and providing nourishment to his sons.

In a theological reflection I wrote for this hospital visit I described it this way to my fellow students:

Imagine a pot gently simmering on the stove. It's been there for three hours. Fragrances of oregano, garlic, pepper, and tomato fill the room. Your stomach growls; you can already taste what is to come. Larry's life is now infused with anticipation rather than endings.

I left him planning some menus for when he returned home. I don't think that the amputation is going to stop Larry from enjoying his life.

I did meet others who seemed hopeless who had much more benign conditions. One woman stood out for me as being particularly alone. She was very proud, regal almost and greeted me as though I was a visitor in her home, even offering me something to drink. She told me she prayed every day and said "God doesn't give you anything you can't handle." Although she gave the impression she was quite wealthy, she seemed to have had a long life of having to handle things on her own. Her children disappointed her, her husband apparently didn't warrant a mention and she felt very alone. The image that came to my mind thinking about her later was of a stone wall with moss growing over it; her genteel manners and stylish personality masking the hardness beneath. I have no doubt that underneath that hardness was a whole lot of longing and pain. If she were ever able to open that up for another to see or indeed for her to see, she might find a great deal more love and connection available to her.

The Rev. Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, CA, gave a talk at a church in Dallas that I attended many years ago. She told a story of when she first started as a minister in rural area. She was in her twenties at the time ordained in the Methodist church. She was called to the bedside of a dying man. She traveled out to see this man on the outskirts of town where he was living with his wife in an old small trailer in very poor conditions. His son was there. He said, "Oh thank you for coming, my Dad wants to talk with you about something." And then he asked her to wait a few minutes in the kitchen while he went to check on his Dad. As she waited, she started to worry. "What if he has done some terrible thing and wants me to forgive him. What should I say? Should I forgive him? Can I?" And she thought, "What if he asks me about death and the afterlife? What should I say to him? How can I help him?" So when the son returned and said that he was ready to see her, she went to his bedroom with a great deal of anxiety. She entered the room where he lay in bed and introduced herself. "Yes," he said, "I'm so glad you're here. There is something I need to tell you." She could feel her heart tense and her palms got sweaty. "Here it comes," she thought. "You need to know this as a minister. It's important that I tell you this," he said. He took her hand and looked into her eyes and said. "In the end, all that's left is gratitude."

In this season of thanksgiving we prepare wonderful food and get together with family or friends or both. How much gratitude do we actually enjoy? What do we suffer over that keeps us from experiencing the joy of gratitude? Perhaps this season if you are harboring troubles that keep you from feeling grateful for your life, you might take on some more as the poor man in the story was advised to do. Visit the homeless shelter, volunteer at the Food Bank.

It's not just gratitude for what we have in this privileged country that is important but gratitude for what we've all been given poor and rich alike—this chance to live this life on this planet for these years. Gratitude for getting to raise your children, have your friends and family, with all their warts and blemishes and all their unique wonderfulness. Gratitude for air to breathe and flowers and trees. Gratitude for the life force itself that allows us to adapt to so many conditions and hardships. Gratitude for our amazing bodies some of which have their quirks and some that have some serious handicaps or illnesses, but all in all are astounding in their complexity and

resilience. It all becomes clearer for many at death—but do we have to wait until then? Spinoza says we can rise above the polarities of pleasure and pain and experience Joy which doesn't have an opposite. This is the joy that comes from stepping back and seeing maybe for the first time who we really are and what our lives really mean to us.

In this holiday season, many of you are going to gather with your extended families. This is a great joy for some and a mixed blessing for others. It can be quite painful to be with family when nothing seems to change. The conversation might be too superficial; the relatives might display the same annoying tendencies – habits or arguments. They may treat you poorly in some way. In some families getting together is explosive and year after year someone gets hurt. But we keep going back. Because after all, family is family – the one place they do have to take you in when you show up on the doorstep. Who would be foolish enough to turn their backs on that kind of insurance?

Some people believe that our emotional vibration attracts to us something of like kind. So in other words if I am fearful, I will attract the things I fear to me. Sometimes that seems true to me. I tend to think more probably that we focus on and select out of the myriad realities going on around us all the time, the things we expect to see. So, if we expect to encounter some uncomfortable situation, if it is to be had we will find it.

Rev. Meg Barnhouse's article in the current UU World magazine. In it she talks about what she would write on fortunes for fortune cookies. She says "I might put something like, 'You will see three beautiful things tomorrow.' Then the whole next day, the person would have their eyes open, looking for beauty. They would ask themselves, 'What is beauty? Is that tree the beautiful thing? This hand of mine? The glimpse of my miraculous eye in the rearview mirror that enables such beauties to pour into my heart?'

I wonder if this year we could look at our families with new eyes. What if you found out that secretly someone in your family really admires you? What if you thought that someone in your family has something very important to say to you although they don't know it? Would they be different if they sensed we were really paying attention to them in a new way? What if when we are with our family members we looked for at least one thing about each of them that we didn't know before—maybe something we would never have suspected about them? Would we look at them with new eyes? Would we discover that they are not quite as predictable as we thought?

If we knew that this may be the last time we saw any of them (and for some of you, this could be the case,) what would we want to say to each one? If we searched our memories and hearts would we be grateful for knowing each of them? Does the perspective of gratitude allow us to feel differently when we are with them?

Just for fun and maybe for an adventure this holiday season, I've created some fortunes for you. I'm sure that my hand was moved by unseen forces and that what I've written on these little slips of paper is just what you need to hear. If you would like one of them they will be in the basket on the table in front. Please come up after the service and get one.

If you take this advice or act on this information, perhaps your holiday gatherings will take on new meaning for you. Even if they don't strike the right note, may your thanksgiving season be full of real gratitude. May you feast on the abundance of your life. May your eyes be opened and in wonder may you find out how much love and joy is available for you just the way things are right now.

Amen.