

The Spirituality of Gratitude

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Hebrews 11-12 (selected verses): By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going... By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, “bowing in worship over the top of his staff.” ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial... ²³ By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.^[g] ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter... By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,^[k] because she had received the spies in peace... Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect... Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

There are some people for whom God seems very near. That has never been the case for me. I believe completely that God created humanity to live in relationship with God and in relationship with each other, but for me that relationship with God often seems distant. I have moments when God’s presence comes breaking through...usually when I’m out in nature, but more often than not, God feels more like a glimmer.

If you are like me, if you have trouble sensing God’s presence or trouble being in an intimate relationship with God, then the good news is that we have help. You see, being in relationship with God is not simply a one-on-one thing, but rather being in relationship with God is also about seeing how God has worked in the lives of the saints who have gone on before us.

How do I know who God is?

I know who God is by those few times in my life where I have had a profound encounter, but just as importantly, by the ways I have experienced God working in the lives of others who have impacted my life.

Our Scripture reading today reads like a who’s who of the heroes of the Old Testament. Now, while the writer of Hebrews had some amazing insight about how these people lived by faith, he was also blinded by his own masculine view of the world and only included one woman. So I will add a few more, “By faith Deborah assumed the leadership of her people and led the early Hebrew nation in one of its most difficult times. By faith, Ruth expressed the same loving loyalty to Naomi that God promises to each of us. By faith, Hannah trusted

that God would give her a son and that she would raise him as a priest. By faith Esther risked her own life to save her people....Now, that's better, a little more complete list.

But the point for the writer of Hebrews is that one of the ways that we can be people of faith is by looking to the example of that "great cloud of witnesses," to looking to those who came before us who lived in such a way that their faith was evident. Many of these people suffered and yet lived out of gratitude and hope rather than out of cynicism and fear. In fact, the writer goes on to say that many of these people did not live to see God's promises fulfilled and yet they lived and died in the hope that those promises would surely be fulfilled one day.

It is not only because of our own personal encounter with God but also because of the witness of people like those named in our Scripture, that we dare to be people of faith.

This week is the time in the Christian year called All Saints Day – a time where we both remember those in our community who have passed away in the past year and also a chance for us to remember and honor all those who have passed away who have had a profound impact on our lives. This is also the last week of our spirituality of sermon series where we are focusing on cultivating a spirituality of gratitude. Gratitude, like all aspects of spirituality, is not only something we try to enter into because it's right, but because it helps us be healthier people. Multiple studies have affirmed the mental, emotional, and even physical health benefits of living out of gratitude rather than cynicism.

And yet, sometimes living out of gratitude isn't always easy, right? Sometimes, it's easier to think about what we don't have than be grateful for what we do. Or it's easy to obsess over the ways we feel we've been wronged and build up walls of resentment rather than leaning into forgiveness.

And that's why I think it's so important to begin our journey of gratitude by remembering and giving thanks for the lives of those who have shown us the way – both because of the ways they have loved us but also because, my guess is, that most of the people we admire and want to emulate were people who lived out of a spirit of gratitude.

I said that I am not one of those people for whom God always seems near. But Catherine Brooks was one of those people. People who knew her called her Mamarene; she was an African American woman born in my hometown of Centre, Alabama in the early 1900s. She lived through the extreme hardships of segregation and injustice. When she was in the fifth grade, she had to drop out of school to help her family make ends meet. They were sharecroppers, so she would get up before dawn to begin working in the fields. Mid-morning, she would walk 3 miles into town where she had work ironing clothes and washing dishes for white people. She would then make the 3 mile trek back to the fields to work until sundown. As she got older, she began working cleaning people's homes and caring for people's children. She helped raise both my mother and also me.

I have more to tell you about Mamarene, but before I do, I need to confess something. My family and I were and are complicit in all of the inequalities and injustices involved in

someone like Mamarene having to work as a nanny for me. No one should have had to drop out of school in the 5th grade. No one should have to experience the virulent racism and oppression that she, and all African Americans of her generation experienced. It was wrong. And while my family and I didn't cause that system of racism and oppression, we didn't do enough to challenge it either.

But even so, Mamarene was like a second grandmother. In fact, Nina's middle name is Katharine, named after her. I choose to tell her story when we remember the saints in our lives because she had a profound impact on me and she is someone who deserves honor. She's someone I want to honor. She loved me. And I loved her. I love her still.

So when I decided to become a minister I went to her house to tell her and she sat me down in her front yard and said these words, "Child I am so happy. I knew you were going to do this because I had been praying to Jesus that he would make you a minister." And she began to think about this relationship she had with Jesus, which for her was like the relationship I might have with my wife or my kids. Jesus was very real to her. And so she started talking about that relationship in an almost poetic way. She said:

"Child, the Lord has been so good to me. I had to quit school when I was ten years old, oh the Lord has been good to me. I worked my whole life, never taking time to rest...oh the Lord's been good to me. I raised 6 kids and 5 of them are dead now...oh the Lord's been good to me."

What was striking to me is that she wasn't naming things that were good in her life. The circumstances she was naming did not seem like the logical refrain would be, "The Lord's been good to me."

She wasn't saying this like she was trying to convince herself, sort of like someone who believes you just can't question God. Rather, she was proclaiming the goodness of God as someone who knew the very depths of human pain and anguish but who also knew what it was to overcome that pain and anguish. She was the most strong-willed, most victorious person I have ever known. And for her, she knew that no matter how hard her life was, no matter how many tragedies she would have to endure, that Jesus was right there with her the whole time. She knew that God didn't cause her suffering but that God would see her through. "The Lord's been good to me," was her testimony.

Now, I don't know how that kind of relationship with Jesus works, but I'm glad she had it. Not only for her sake, but for my sake. I am glad to know that God is real – not just every now and then – but all the time for people like Mamarene. I am glad to know that my inability to have that degree of intimacy does not mean that God is not an intimate God. So when I struggle in my faith; when I feel that my prayers are talking to no one in particular, I remember Mamarene and I know that God is real. And I find that through her intimate relationship with God, God becomes real for me. She is one of my great cloud of witnesses and in times when I doubt, when I struggle to have faith, I remember that God is the God of Mamarene and if God was real for her, then that's good enough for me.

I hope that all of you have saints in your life whose memory calls you into deeper intimacy with God. People whose faith is so strong that they make up for our lack of faith. But these saints live on, not only in our memories, but in our lives. Toward the end of our scripture passage today, there's this curious statement that I want to reread for you:

"Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect"

Isn't that fascinating. The writer of Hebrews believes that the work of those saints who have gone before is not finished. The last chapter of their lives has not been written. It's up to us to write that last chapter. Through us, through our living into the faith that they demonstrated, we are bringing their faith to completion. They continue to live on in us.

Today, we have a chance to remember all those saints who have gone on before us – those whose faith in God increases our faith; those whose witness has not only impacted our lives but continues to live in us. But my hope is that we will not only remember them, but we will see ourselves as continuing in the path they led us. Their faith is perfected in us and we trust and hope that our faith will be perfected in those who come after us.

In your bulletin, you will see our litany of remembrance. During this time of prayer, you will be invited to name those who have had an impact in your life. When we get to that part of the prayer, simply call out their name if you'd like. One of our deacons is standing by our candle altar and will light a candle in honor of each person we name.

Let us pray our litany of remembrance together:

Litany of Remembrance (adapted from Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell's All Saint's Day Litany)

One: We remember the great ancestors of our faith,
from Abraham and Sarah, to Paul and Phoebe:

All: Ancestors of the faith, we remember you.

One: We remember the prophets and priests,
the ministers and teachers who have taught us the way of God:

All: Teachers of the faith, we remember you.

One: We remember our grandparents and parents, aunts and uncles,
those who have gone before us in our lifetime:

All: Family of our faith, we remember you.

One: We lift up the memories of children and grandchildren,
brothers and sisters, husbands and wives and parents
whose lives ended too soon:

All: Those close in our heart, we remember you.

One: We lift up to You, O God,
the names of those we have lost in this past year from our lives,
knowing that they are with Your heart forever.
As we read these names, we will pause after every name
to remember, pray, and give thanks for their life.

[list the names of those from our community who died this past year]

We remember all the saints who have finished their earthly journey but whose lives continue to speak to us and inspire us. We name them before God and before one another now.

[as each name is called, a deacon will light a candle]

We celebrate the lives of those we have named, O God,
and lift up many more names in our hearts.

**All: Family of God, we remember you, and we honor you.
We know you are with us in the spirit of worship,
and you will not be forgotten.**

One: We give thanks, O God,
for all who have gone on to join with You beyond this life.
We trust in the hope of resurrection and the promise of new life in Christ,
and know that in our grief and celebration, O God,
You are with us through it all, and we are not left alone.
In the name of Christ, in whom love lives forever, we pray.
Amen.