

Indebtedness

Communion Homily by Rev. Maria Pap
at the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor
March 2009

1 Thess 1, 2-3

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope (in our Lord, Jesus Christ.)

For most people one of the most awkward and sometimes embarrassing feelings is gratitude.

There are few people who can accept gifts gracefully. I am not talking about morons, who think they deserve everything they get and even more, but those of us, who wonder and ponder and question the gift and what lies behind it. I am talking about people, like myself, who do not know on which foot to stand when they get a gift and for whom the words or gestures of gratitude seem and sound inadequate.

I always wondered why?

One of the possible answers is the feeling of indebtedness – which becomes stronger with the realization that you either do not deserve that gift or you are in no position to reciprocate it. This may lead to a loss of self-esteem and go on to resentment. One of my favorite characters, Harriet Vane, Dorothy Sayers sleuths, expresses this anger perfectly, whenever reminded, that Lord Peter has saved her life: “I am so grateful that sometimes I could bite.”

As funny as it may seem, this sentence could apply to all of us in certain periods or situations in our lives- and I am thinking about those of us, most of us, who do not take anything for granted, who strive for everything in their lives and who have a hard time to accept that sometimes you need a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on, another human being to love and be loved.

Why is so hard to be grateful? Why is it, that sometimes instead of joy and gratefulness, we feel inadequate and shy?

Perhaps, because gratitude is about more than just us. It blows away our self sufficiency and self reliance and teaches us about our connectedness to one another and to God.

Gratitude is about accepting the gifts of life and love and pain and struggle- gratitude teaches us about our own limitations but pushes us to conquer uncharted territories.

For the self-made man/woman of this century here is where the stumbling block lies – to realize that I am more than my achievements, that I owe my life, my happiness, my present and the possibility of my future and that of my beloved ones to others and ultimately to the higher reality we call God.

Can you accept this or at least consider it?

If you cannot it's not the end of the world- especially not your own- but you will close yourself in your magic circle and your spiritual life might wither away.

For those who will consider it or perhaps even accept it- this is not a passport to eternal happiness but it is the possibility of a road shared with others in all circumstances, it is the possibility of forging the community we strive for.

Today we gathered together to celebrate the holy communion, communion with one another and with God, in the spirit of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Throughout time and throughout the world Christians gather together from time to time to share the bread and wine and to give thanks. They do it in different ways and with different meanings but there is one constant factor- the community.

Of all the liturgical elements of the church this is the most holy as it is about the whole of the community and is about active participation, which engages body, mind and soul in harmony with those around us.

Today and at this moment we are a community. Some of you joined us to celebrate, to share with us this opportunity, some may have come out of curiosity, some out of sense of duty – nevertheless we are together and this is what counts.

All of us are bringing into this circle ourselves, our feelings of expectancy, of joys or sorrows and perhaps those of gratitude, too- with ease or unease, with a cheerful soul or with heaviness of heart or mind, reluctantly or with abandon- but with a willingness to understand and accept this holy burden.

The burden of knowing that we belong together and we belong to God and in these relationships we strive to give and receive with gratitude. A gratitude with has its roots in the perfect love of God toward us and in the understanding and challenging imperfection of human love towards Him/Her and towards each other.

What can we be grateful for?

We need to be grateful, first of all for this community. We know we are not perfect- neither was the first community of Jesus`s followers, his disciples. There was misunderstanding, little jealousies, even betrayals- yet out of that community of different people a movement emerged, which changed and shaped the world- for better or for worse. We know that we are different, that different circumstances, ideas and hopes drove us but with the same longing for happiness and contentment. As the apostle confesses, we too pray for you and give thanks- for you, who are here with us at the moment and for all those who belong to this community. A community, whose faith, love and labour we have experienced in our lives and our struggles and back home and we acknowledge this indebtedness with a “grateful heart” and thankful happiness.

What can you be grateful for?

You need to be grateful for this community of yours, which shelters you from the world`s and your own follies, which gives you warmth, openness and meaning and a sense of belonging. Gratitude for those with whom you share this sacred space and time – your life -- which cannot find its true fulfillment without the others.

Finally we need to be grateful for being the children of our heavenly Father- and this is the gratitude which really bothers us as our love and work is a pallid reflection of all that He continually gives to us. But this is a weight, which cannot shatter or diminish us as we know that it can be eased through love and through our everyday service toward each other.

This communion is about us as human beings and children of God, as disciples of Jesus and members of a community united in gratitude and wish to serve. According to Jesus the only mark of discipleship is the love towards each other. Let us take this bread and wine in the gratefulness of our existence, in the acknowledgement of our Father`s love and in our true wish to live according to the teachings of our master.

Let us pray for this community to continue to work in faith, to labour prompted by love and to grow in hope and happiness. Amen