

We Give Thanks
Homily at Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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Anyone ever say grace here? Before Thanksgiving dinner?

When I was growing up, my family only said grace before supper on two occasions during the year: the first was when we visited my grandparents in Ohio: we would say before the meal, "God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food; by his hands we all are fed, give us Lord our daily bread. Amen!"; and the second was before Thanksgiving dinner at my family home: we would hold hands, and take turns around the table each saying something we were thankful for on that afternoon. [**hands out**] This was my favorite part of the meal, where friends and family gathered together would pause and reflect on how fortunate we were to be enjoying each other's company, to be warm and cozy at the start of the long Wisconsin winter, and to be looking forward to a big feast.

Togetherness, warmth and shelter, love, abundant food: these are things that it is easy to feel grateful for, especially on the one day a year we set aside for thankfulness. But sometimes being grateful is more than just noticing what is good right around you. Sometimes, with enough time and reflection, life events that at the time seem catastrophic can inspire thankfulness.

I sure didn't feel grateful when I was fired from my job as a construction laborer. I felt really angry! And hurt. And sad. And ashamed--I had thought of myself as someone who could succeed at anything. And I felt scared--what was I going to do for money? I remember walking into the company headquarters that Friday. All the other carpenters and assistants were hanging out and drinking beer the way they did every Friday evening. Some had their wives and kids with them. They all knew I'd just been fired, and I felt so ashamed, but I also felt proud enough that I didn't want to let on. I walked in, and all the conversation stopped, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me, maybe wondering if I was going to make a scene.

I gathered up my things in that uncomfortable silence, and then Ben spoke up. He was the second-youngest employee, just a little bit older than I was, and I thought he was kind of arrogant and kind of a wise-aleck. "Hey, I was sorry to hear the news," he said. "You never know, it could be the best thing that ever happened to you. I got fired from the job I had before this one, and it was just what I needed. It humbled me, and hey, I wouldn't be here if I was still there. It could be that this is just what you need."

I would like to tell you that I was able to appreciate his words for the act of ministry they were, that I stopped, looked him in the eye, and said, "You know, Ben, you might be right, and at the very least you've given me something to think about. Thank you." [**big breath**] About the best thing that I can say about my response is that I didn't swear at him or call him any bad names. Have you ever heard the phrase, "his voice

dripped with sarcasm”? That was how my words felt as they left my mouth: “Yeah, thanks, Ben. Real helpful. Thanks. A lot.” That’s what I said. And then I walked out of that corrugated steel building for the last time.

Almost six years later, that memory still stings. But, how can I be anything but grateful for that moment? What if I had stuck it out as an inconsistent and mediocre-at-best construction laborer and wanna-be carpenter? I don't know what that path would have looked like, but I do know that getting fired was an important part of my journey, and that, yes, in some ways it was the best thing that ever happened to me, and yes, that it humbled me. Getting fired taught me that I actually had some pretty big prejudices about what kind of work I valued and thought was important, and to realize the honor and value in trade work. Getting fired led me to really examine what I wanted to do in my own work life, and what I was and wasn’t capable of. And it pushed me towards seminary, and ultimately to standing here in this pulpit today. The last six years have been an incredible journey for me, and could not have happened, or at least could not have happened in the same way, without my having been fired from my job as a construction worker.

We often use Kahlil Gibran’s words from *The Prophet*, in particular his words “On Marriage,” and “On Children.” But the words of that book that have made the most impact on my life are his words On Pain. “Your pain,” he says, “is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain. And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy; and you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields. And you would watch with serenity through the winters of your grief.”

Losing my job—no, being fired from my job for incompetence and poor performance—hurt, and that pain had a number of lessons hidden inside that needed time to unpack and sort through. One lesson was that my notion about myself, that I could do any work I put my mind to, was a myth. There are things that I’m just not suited for. Another lesson was wrapped in one of the reasons given for my dismissal: I was almost always more interested in talking with clients and coworkers than I was in helping to build decks on back porches, or tearing out drywall as part of a demolition. Relationship trumped productivity for me in the construction world, so maybe it would be good to find a line of work where relationship **was** productivity. The lesson that I learned from getting into repeated accidents with the dump truck was that I shouldn’t drive dump trucks, at least not professionally.

Losing my job was painful. It was humiliating, and it took me a long time to begin to come to grips with it. And the strange thing is, even though I’ve just spent long minutes telling you how grateful I am for that part of my life experience and how thankful I am for how it helped to put me on a truer path for myself, I’m not sure that I would go through it again if I had the choice. But, losing or keeping that job was never my choice, it was out of my hands. My choice has been to learn to be grateful for

something that is more complicated than I could sum up in a short sentence, going around the table before my family's Thanksgiving meal on a November afternoon.