

The Gift of Gratitude

In the name of him who has filled us to overflowing with all good things, dear friends in Christ: about three months ago, if you watched the evening news at all, probably every other story had something to do with the one year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the devastating category five storm that ravaged the southern coast of our country and put most of the city of New Orleans under water. Some of these news articles stressed the positive side: how much progress had been made since the storm, how volunteers from all over the nation were still rolling up their sleeves and pitching in to help in any and every way they could, how the selfless sacrifices of some people were making such a tremendous difference, and how certain victims were landing on their feet again despite their tragic losses and pushing ahead to make a better future for themselves. There were plenty of encouraging stories like those.

Unfortunately, for every positive news story about the hurricane's aftermath, it seemed that there were at least two or three negative ones: politicians still pointing fingers and blaming each other for mistakes that were made, incompetence and corruption in the use of funds for the relief effort, little or no progress made in repairing the levees that failed, and people still in refugee centers, homeless, jobless, without hope, and feeling forgotten one year after the storm that literally drowned in fetid water their lives as they had once known them. I think the most depressing story I heard was one in the latter category; but strangely, it wasn't the plight of the victims that I found most disturbing. No, it was more the attitude they had.

The story was about some permanently displaced people living in one of the many trailer park camps that were set up to shelter people whose homes and neighborhoods had been destroyed. And to be fair, the camp certainly wasn't the nicest place in the world to be living – but then, you shouldn't expect conditions in a temporary refugee village to be the most convenient and comfortable. That concept, however, had failed to occur to some of the inhabitants of this particular camp. They were unhappy with the way things were going, and they were angry that more wasn't being done for them. *What was being done?* They had all been given quarters in brand new, fully equipped trailer homes. Water and electricity were being provided at no cost. Food was largely provided – at least all the basic necessities were. They were given free clothing, free laundry service, free daily transportation to nearby cities and towns, free daycare for their kids, and access to free schooling for adults, job training programs, and career counseling. Medical and dental services were being provided without cost. There was also a warehouse of donated items available to them that contained just about everything someone might need: furniture, bedding, dishes, small appliances, cleaning supplies, you name it. The one thing they actually had to pay for themselves was propane for cooking. That was about it; but most of them were also receiving welfare checks that normally would have gone toward paying for all the stuff they now had for free. So the simple fact was that a lot of them were living better in this temporary village than they were before the storm. But that didn't stop them from complaining. One guy summed up the prevailing attitude among these folks pretty well. He said, "I'm sick and tired of this. Nobody's ever given me nuthin'."

And if you were sitting there watching this broadcast, at about that point it was hard to keep your jaw from hitting the floor. Sure, the hurricane was a terrible thing, and you wanted to feel sorry for these victims; but the lack of even the slightest amount of appreciation for all that was being done, for what was being freely given and provided, for the opportunities that were being made available ... how, you were caused to wonder, could anyone be so blind to the truth? So utterly ungrateful? It made you want to shout, "What do you mean no one's ever given you anything? Can you name one thing you've got that wasn't given to you?"

And making their ingratitude and complaining seem even more inappropriate was the fact that interspersed on the news at that time were articles about the continuing relief efforts in northern Pakistan where a series of violent earthquakes had destroyed entire villages and killed tens of thousands of people. There the refugees really did have nothing: no food, no water, no shelter, no medicine. And the affected areas were so remote and high up in the mountains that it was nearly impossible to get any aid to them. Their lives were hanging by a thread from moment to moment. And the difference between the attitudes of the victims was like night and day. On one hand you had desperate people who were thankful for *anything*—any small token that might ease their suffering, and on the other hand you had people who seemed to think

that having experienced a disaster should be like winning the lottery. “Because I suffered a loss, somebody, the government, the rich, the rest of you, I don’t care who, you all owe me something; and I’m determined to wring out every penny’s worth of compensation this tragedy can generate for me.”

Of course, this wasn’t true of all the Katrina victims, or even most of them. No, these were the exceptional champions of ingratitude. But it was pretty easy to understand the problem. These people were, for the most part, folks who had lived for generations in run down sections of the inner city. And among them was prevalent what can only be called a “welfare mentality”. It comes from years of living on public assistance and having everything handed to you. Human nature, being what it is, always wants to take advantage of such situations. And so, the good will and charity of the community to help people in time of need ends up creating people who are perpetually dependent. Always receiving the basic necessities of life for free saps them of initiative, their desire to improve themselves, and to work hard and try to get a good paying job. It’s easier and very often safer not to. And what develops over time is an expectation of benevolence. People begin to think of public assistance as their right, their entitlement. They receive so much for so long that they can’t see that everything they have is a gift. And then when something like this hurricane happens, and people are bending over backward to try to help them, because they are inconvenienced nothing is good enough. And for the help they do receive there’s no thanks, no appreciation, nothing but “When will you give me what I really deserve.”

And when we see this sort of ingratitude we are right to be appalled. It’s disgusting. And the funny thing about it is that sitting on the outside, we can see it so plainly when it rears its ugly head; but those who are caught up in it can’t see it at all. They are blind to their ingratitude. Their anger and complaining is born of what they believe to be a terrible injustice being inflicted upon them. If you were to suggest to them that they are being ungrateful, they would be filled with indignation.

But my goal this morning is not to expose these people for the insufferable ingrates that they are. No, my real goal is to show that when you get right down to it, there isn’t a bit a difference between us and them. Human beings are by nature ungrateful. And if these people couldn’t see their misplaced and inappropriate ingratitude, what makes us think we can see ours? What I mean is this: we look from the outside at their situation and become angry with them. And part of the reason for it is that we think of them as parasites on society. They’re taking advantage of the kindness of others. And we tend to think, “I could never be like that. No, no, I work for what I have. I’ve worked hard, I’ve been clever, I’ve invested wisely, I got an education, I did ... whatever. The bottom line is that I’ve earned everything I’ve got. I never asked anything of anybody. *Nobody never gave me nuthin’.*” That last part sound familiar?

In today’s reading from Deuteronomy you can almost hear the Lord ask, “Oh really? You say you worked hard? That you deserve it? Well, refresh my memory here: who gave you your ability to work? Who gave you your faculties and members? Who gave you your sight and hearing, your intellect, your spirit of enterprise, your creativity, your talents, your ability to see an opportunity and take advantage of it? Who gave you this good land? Your family? Your education? The freedoms you enjoy? Don’t you see that these things are gifts too? Can you name one thing you’ve got that I didn’t give you?”

Now that I think of it, that’s not exactly right. We do have a few things that God didn’t give us, namely our over-inflated opinion of ourselves and our ingratitude – but these aren’t good things. These are things we should seek to be rid of. And with that in mind, it is my Thanksgiving Day prayer for you and for myself that the Lord would open our eyes to see the truth as he sees it: that he would take away our blindness and illumine our hearts and minds to see that all things that we are and that we have are the gifts of his grace and his completely unreasonable love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have forgiveness of sin – even the sin of ingratitude. It is my prayer that he would give to each of us the gift of true gratitude and humility, for these are things we could never acquire by ourselves. And knowing that he will grant what we ask in Jesus’ name, it is also my prayer that he would give us the grace to show forth our gratitude by putting to use the gifts and talents he’s given us in ways that will be profitable for him – that we too may share in our Master’s joy.

May our gracious God and Father grant to you the gift of gratitude, that you may enjoy a *truly* blessed Thanksgiving. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!