

**Claire Feingold Thoryn**  
Theme: “Gratitude”  
Homily: “**The Fourth Panel**”  
**November 8, 2015**

**Call to Worship:**

There are some heights to which we have not risen,  
and never will;  
there are some depths to which we have not fallen,  
and never will, we pray.

Somewhere between the heights and the depths  
are places where we can reach up and reach out  
for the strength we need for our journey.

This is such a place.

Here we pause for renewal and reflection;  
here we worship with gratitude and hope.

*(From Worship Web, Paul Bicknell, adapted by CFT)*

**Reading: 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm**

*King James Version*

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

**Sermon: “The Fourth Panel”**

Each month, to go along with the worship theme, I create a spiritual exercise and I give them to our covenant groups.

A covenant group is a small group of 5-10 people that meets monthly with a facilitator for spiritual and personal conversation.

The covenant group members try out the spiritual exercise over the course of the month, and when they get together they share how the experience was for them.

At Follen about 120 people are in a covenant group. Anyone at Follen can join a covenant group—just call the church office to ask about it.

The spiritual exercise belongs to everyone, not just the covenant groups.

This month it was to keep a Gratitude Journal.

My twist on the Gratitude Journal was you have to think of three *different* things each day you are grateful for, and you can't repeat the things over the course of the month.

I've been keeping my journal in the notes app on my phone—and whenever I am suddenly struck with gratitude, I pull out my phone and add the inspiration to the list.

One thing I discovered is that when I find myself grateful for something new, and pull up the list on my phone,

I get to count my blessings all over again.

I hope that as the month goes on, you might send me a few standouts from your list.

Some of my friends and colleagues are very into keeping a public Gratitude Journal, in the lead-up to Thanksgiving,

as their Facebook status.

Which can be great, like this one update from my colleague Jake Morrill:

Day 5 of 30 Days of Thanksgiving: that, out my front door is not a boiling lake of sulfuric lava, where goat-headed tormentors sail past, shrieking curses from oversized wash tubs outfitted with long oars carved from the bones of the damned, and a red sky has darkened with birds of prey overhead, who all whisper my name, but instead is only a quiet side-street where most of the neighbors are kind enough to support my kid's middle-school cookie-dough band-class fundraiser, and the man who walks his little dog five or six times a day keeps us all up on the neighborhood gossip. At least, that's my guess, if today is like most days, when I open the door.

Something truly to be grateful for.

But not all public expressions of gratitude are funny and thought-provoking.

Sometimes they are just annoying, and if you go online

to sites like instagram or twitter and search for

the hashtag "blessed" you'll see what I mean.<sup>1</sup>

(Hashtag is sort of like adding a keyword to something.)

People, especially celebrities, will post something that is essentially bragging and add #blessed to attempt to make the post sound humble.

Celebrity photos of the red carpet, huge diamond rings, champagne, and extravagant travel, all are apparently signs that the recipient is #blessed.

Lots of people use the hashtag in a mocking or ironic way, like the person who tweeted:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2013/12/15-twitter-jokes-we-can-retire-now/blessed>  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html>  
<http://elitedaily.com/women/hashtag-blessed-ego-instagram/1111568/>  
<http://www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2014/11/blessed.html>  
<http://i.imgur.com/0mJBRSv.jpg>

Caught a piece of bacon falling out of my sandwich right before it hit the ground #blessed

It's funny, but all these #blessed blessings suck all the real energy and power from the concept of feeling blessed—of soul-deep gratitude.

Real honest gratitude is never smug or braggy.

A blessing is richer than wealth and tastier than bacon.

Of course those social media posts on Instagram and Twitter only show a self-curated image.

#blessed is a manic, “Jazz hands!” kind of happiness. Everyone is smiling and has great hair.

A #blessed life apparently never includes pain or loss,

or even mild discord or inconvenience.

But of course we know that kind of life is impossible.

I think a truly *blessed* life comes from

living with integrity;

loving your work, most of the time;

loving the people around you, most of the time;

and loving yourself, most of the time.

It also comes from feeling that your life makes a difference in the world—however small.

Our reading this morning, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm,

is often spoken at funerals, and it may seem odd

that I chose it as a reading to talk about gratitude and blessedness.

After all, I don't think a lot of people would post on Twitter,

“Walking through the valley of the shadow of death. #blessed”

But listen again to the words of the psalmist, King James version:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Here is how *I* interpret that Psalm:

God is with me; I have everything I need.

I am refreshed by the beauty and stillness of nature.

My heart is at peace, my regrets are few;

I try to do what is right.

When I am filled with sorrow and grief, I still have hope;

God's love and strength comforts me.  
When I am alone, I do not feel lonely.  
Even when angry, hateful people surround me,  
I am aware of the many blessings in my life;  
I have plenty to eat  
And many small luxuries that make my life sweet.  
My life is filled with goodness and tenderness;  
I feel thankful every day.  
While the Psalms of the Bible are historically attributed to King David, we don't really know who wrote them.

I imagine meeting the person who wrote that psalm.  
She would meet my gaze with clear, open eyes.  
She would clasp my hand firmly.  
She would listen as though her whole body was tuning in to my words.  
She would breathe deeply before speaking.  
Her voice would be gentle and strong.

That is the sort of person I would like  
to raise my child to be;  
the sort of person I would like to be.

The psalmist does not ask God to remove all the sadness and pain from her life.  
She still is touched by death.  
She still has enemies, people who think she is foolish,  
or weak, or grandiose.  
Yet even as she walks through times of trouble,  
her eyes remain clear, her head unbowed.

In other psalms the writer asks God to smite his or her enemies, yet in this psalm,  
the psalmist describes a table prepared in the presence of her enemies.

I don't think it is a coincidence that we modern-day humans have raised this psalm above all the other, more bloodthirsty psalms.  
Out of hundreds of Psalms in the Bible  
this is the one many of us know by heart.

While it might make us feel guiltily happy to think of our enemies being smited,  
it feels even better to think of being reconciled and at peace with our enemies. It feels *blessed*.

“Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.”

I imagine a Thanksgiving table, overflowing with food,  
the sort of table usually filled with closest friends and family.

Yet in this case, God is inviting the psalmist to sit down with her enemies,  
to pull out their chairs and welcome them to this table,  
to share the gifts of the spirit, to forgive and start again.

Goodness and mercy shall follow her—  
because she creates a space for goodness and mercy and she leaves goodness and mercy in her  
wake.

A minister friend named her two cats Goodness and Mercy.  
It's good to know, when all else fails,  
and you are walking in the valley of shadows,  
your pets still have your back.

I think that human beings only truly know  
the kind of happiness we could call blessedness  
when we have, in some way, made our peace  
with the valley of the shadow of death.  
When we are honest with ourselves and others  
about the fact that the earth is hurting,  
that we are hurting,  
that we have hurt others,  
that we are all just muddling through and making mistakes and trying and failing.

And yet, with all of that, here we are  
with a table prepared for us—yea, even coffee being prepared for us right now as we sit here!  
And green fields just outside our door.  
Our cup overflows.

I started today with one internet meme and I'll finish with another.  
The sermon title comes from blog called "3eanuts."

A young philosopher-type realized that if you take Charles Schulz's Peanuts cartoon,  
and take off the last panel,  
it changes the overall tone of the comic.  
The blogger writes:

"Charles Schulz's Peanuts comics often conceal the existential despair of their world with a  
closing joke at the characters' expense. With the last panel omitted, despair pervades all."

Here's an example from 3eanuts, three panels from a 1957 comic strip:

In it, Charlie Brown says to Linus:  
*"I feel kind of depressed today."*

In the second panel, Linus replies,  
*“Do you ever have the feeling that life has passed you by?”*  
In the third panel, Charlie Brown says:  
*“Worse than that...”*

On 3eanuts.com that is the final scene.  
But it was too bleak for me, I couldn't let it go,  
I had to find the original comic.

So I dug around in some Charlie Brown compilations and found it.  
In the fourth panel, Charlie Brown exclaims to Linus,  
*“Sometimes I think life and I are going in opposite directions!”*

Sometimes life feels like three panels of gloom. And then comes that fourth panel, with its  
glimmer of hope.  
#blessed.

A blessed life is one in which we live authentically,  
with integrity,  
we stand by our choices,  
we apologize for our mistakes,  
and we are grateful for the sweetness of simple pleasures.

May we practice gratitude in many ways large and small, public and private.

May we seek not only to live a blessed life,  
But to be a blessing to all we meet.

May we find peace and be creators of peace.

If we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death,  
may we feel God's presence within us and all around us.

And when we feel like saying “Good Grief!” and giving up, may we find that our fourth panel is  
just around the corner.

*Amen.*