

Lent.

a season of spiritual preparation

Greetings to you.

Lent, 2019.

I find autumn quite bleak with its heavy aromas, dying gardens, falling leaves, and especially the shortening days. I anticipate the brightness of the snow, the brilliant blue of the winter skies, the delight of walking my beloved Maisie through the woods, seeing her leap through the snow drifts with her doggy friends and watching her create “snow angels” in the fresh snow. As winter progresses, the texture of the snow changes; trees begin to appear lacy as the buds swell. The days lengthen. These are all signs of hope for me, and I am filled with gratitude.

Though life in this free and peaceful land is not perfect, we often experience kindness and generosity in other people. The wonder of creation and the blessing of God’s love call us to gratitude and a practice of thanksgiving.

Scripture speaks to us about gratitude. John’s Gospel relates a time Jesus experienced His friends’ gratitude. *Jesus came to the home of Lazarus whom He had raised from the dead. The family gave a dinner for Him. Martha served, and Lazarus sat at the table with Him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples (the one who was about to betray him), accused her, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’* excerpts from John 12:1-8

In this passage, we see gratitude shown in several ways, and we also see its effects. Mary, Martha and Lazarus were close to Jesus, best of friends. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, so imagine their gratitude for such a wonderful gift! They prepared a feast to show their gratitude. Mary, Martha and Lazarus all wanted to show Jesus how much He meant to them. Each of them showed their gratitude in a different way.

Lazarus stayed close and sat at the table with Jesus. Martha lovingly prepared the feast. Mary anointed His feet with precious perfume and wiped them with her hair. She expressed the depth of her gratitude through her sacrifice. The abundance of Mary's gratitude made clear what Jesus meant to her; and wiping His feet with her hair showed her humility. Judas did not grasp the point of Mary's expression of gratitude. "Why do you waste money on this luxury, instead of giving that money to the poor?" Sometimes, we too are uncomfortable with extravagant signs of gratitude. But Jesus rebuked Judas. "Leave her alone...you do not always have me." The family of Lazarus gives us an example of gratitude. During Lent, we are called to gratitude for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He saw the world with the eyes of our Creator. His gratitude for our life was reflected in the generosity of His sharing with others – teaching, healing, and pointing to God's presence in the lives of the people around Him. When Jesus humbly washed His disciples' feet at the Last Supper, He assumed the role of a servant, and taught us how to live. Mother Theresa followed His example, witnessing that everyone is a beloved child of God by lovingly cleansing the terrible wounds of people found dying on the streets. The effect of her gratitude was generous service.

Sometimes our lives are difficult. We experience losses and doubts of many kinds, situations which threaten to overwhelm us. Gratitude is a personal effort to remind ourselves that, even when life is most difficult, there is a thread calling us to gratitude, a thread perhaps as simple as a ray of sunlight reminding us of Jesus' presence. Our gratitude may be for having a bed and safety at night, or for having noticed a need and being able to respond to it.

So in the face of both our joys and our sorrows, how do we develop this sense of gratitude? Sometimes it bubbles up easily for us. Other times gratitude is elusive at best. Our gratitude can be more a discipline than an extravagant expression of thanksgiving. Yet, a simple thank you is a

beginning. God gives us our existence and God does amazing things through our lives.

Like the disciples who would not always have Jesus with them, we do not always have Lent, this time to experience what God has given us in the life of Jesus. Lent is an opportunity for reflection, confession, repentance, and preparation for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection at Easter. Through our Lenten disciplines, we can nurture our gratitude and develop our practice of thanksgiving. We wait. We pray to be renewed for the work ahead. We ponder the ways we can choose gratitude as our primary attitude in life. We are filled with awe that God became human in the person of Jesus. We respond with gratitude to Jesus who walked to Jerusalem, to suffering and death, to teach us the depth of what love is.

Loving God, thank you for my life.

My blessings are many.

I am filled with gratitude for the ability to love and be loved,

for the opportunity to see the wonders of creation,

for sleep and water, for a mind that thinks and a body that feels.

Thank you even for those things in my life that are not what I have hoped.

When my heart feels stretched or empty, I rejoice that you are near me,

and that in the midst of turbulence, I am growing and learning.

I thank you most of all for your and eternal love. Amen.

I think of you all with gratitude. Joan.

Reverend Joan Riding