

When I went into the ministry, I knew that there were certain occupational hazards. I knew there would never be Sunday morning golf games. I knew I wouldn't be spending a whole lot of Saturday nights out late. I knew I would have to start liking wearing black clothes a whole lot more. And, most importantly, I knew that at every Thanksgiving meal I went to for the rest of my life, I'd be asked to say the blessing.

Usually I get asked at the table, but this year I actually got a call early on letting me know I was going to be giving the blessing. And so, I've been thinking about it the last few days. It's sort of harder when you know what's coming. You think that you have to come up with something really good. That you have to sound REALLY grateful.

Because if there is one day a year that we feel like we really have to step up our gratitude game, it's tomorrow. We want to really acknowledge all those things we have to be grateful for, and we want to give them their proper due, at least this one day of the year. Because truly, we have a lot to be grateful for.

But the problem is, I know who is going to be at the table with me this Thursday. And, just like in previous years, I know some of those people have not had a good year.

There are broken relationships, overdue bills, failing health, unemployment, depression, alienations from families, a general sense that there is no hope, and probably a hundred other things I don't know about. And I know, for some of them, Thanksgiving is particularly bittersweet this year.

In seminary I had a professor who was particularly fond of talking about two concepts: grace and gratitude. Grace and gratitude, he would remind us, go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin.

We are given so much grace in a broken world. Last night some of us gathered here for our religious education program on the film "The Power of Forgiveness." One of the clergy people interviewed talked about grace. He said something to the effect of, "I have made so many withdrawals from the bank of grace." We all have. And sometimes we haven't even realized it. Sometimes grace is like a forgotten overdraft account that kicks in and that we never have to pay back, so we don't acknowledge it. But the reality is that recognized or not, there is grace in your life. That grace may have come from another source, a person you love, for instance, but ultimately they got it somewhere else too. Because at its source, all grace comes from God

The biggest challenge in most of our lives is not that we don't have enough grace. It's that we fail to recognize that grace when we receive it.

I'm as guilty of that as anyone. One time when I was going through a particularly rough patch in my life (I'd been laid off, things were tight, hope seemed far away) someone I respected suggested I try to write a gratitude list. If looks could kill...

I resisted it for a while. And things didn't get any better. And I just got angrier, and more hopeless, and more miserable.

Sometimes things have to get pretty bad before we make change, you know? Because eventually I tried it. I started with the obvious ones. I have food to eat. I have a warm place to sleep. I have good health.

Then I moved on to others. I have a car to drive. I have the chance to go down and sit at the ocean. I have options I don't even know about yet.

And then the best stuff came out: I have a family that loves me. I have incredible friends. I have a calling I love. I have a faith that sustains me. I have hope.

I have hope.

That's when I knew it was going to be okay.

That was last Thanksgiving. I was scared to death about the future, but I have probably never had a Thanksgiving that I've been so grateful in all my life.

Until now. Because now I have everything I had before, and so much more has been added. My gratitude list is long. And, it's not that I think I received any more grace this year than normal. It's because I think that I was able to see the grace I already had been given, and I was able to build on that in hope and gratitude.

My seminary professor was fond of reminding us that the way of life for a true person of faith is to live your life as a prayer of thanksgiving. That no matter what you are doing in your life, you are doing it to say "thank you" to God for what you have been given. We don't try to live a good life because we are trying to work our way in heaven or make God love us more. God's already got that covered. We live a good life because we have been given gifts that are so wonderful that we can't even fully understand them in this life. And so this life that we live, this is our way of saying "thank you" to God.

I really love Thanksgiving. It's one of my favorite holidays. But it's not actually a religious holiday. It's a national one. And, as much as I believe in the importance of this national day of thanks, I'm reminded that our faith does not set aside one day a year to say "thank you". Because this isn't a one day a year thing. It's a daily thing.

Tomorrow we will gather with friends and family to celebrate. I love that. I love the turkey and dressing (or, as you all Northerners call it, stuffing) and cranberry sauce. And I love the friends I'm going to sit down with at two meals tomorrow. I love the fellowship of the day. But I also love knowing that thanksgiving is not limited to one day a year. I love knowing that everyday can be thanksgiving.

And so I have two challenges for you for the coming year. The first is this: What can you do to make every day thanksgiving? What can you do to carve out a place in your day to day life where you give thanks to God for all the good things you have?

And the other challenge is this: What grace can you extend to the other people in your life that will make them come to the table next year with even more gratitude? What can you do to share that grace you've been given, and to make it better for someone else? Because God's grace, it's generative. It's not something we need to hold onto. It's something that only grows with each person that it touches. In your gratitude, you have the power to create a world that is filled with God's grace.

We have a saying in the South. It's sort of similar to when you say "that's just the icing on the cake". When we're talking about something and we want to signal the really important stuff, what we hope for, we might tell you about it and then tell you "the rest is just gravy". That means, the rest is nice, but it's just a little something extra, a little something special. It's not the heart of the matter.

Grace and gratitude, they are the main attraction when it comes to Thanksgiving. The rest? The meal and everything else you're going to go home now to prepare? They're just gravy. Really good gravy, but gravy none the less. And if you don't have the real main courses, if you don't have the grace and the gratitude, what good is the gravy?

So, have a wonderful Thanksgiving. Have a day filled with all the joy of friends and family and feasts. But as you sit down to the table, don't forget that the turkey is not the centerpiece of the day. And as you leave the table, don't think that Thanksgiving has ended. Because, it hasn't. And it doesn't have to. As long as you keep living a life centered on gratitude for God's grace, it is thanksgiving day. And the rest is just gravy. Amen.