

Thanksgiving and the Eleven O'clock News

By Rev. James M. Truxell, M.Div.

The "attitude of gratitude" is a hallmark of spiritual wholeness in most spiritual traditions. And we know from psychological and neurological research that a person who lives out of a thankful heart is likely to be emotionally and physically healthier, and enjoy relationships that are steadfast and nourishing. But with alarming frequency, our impulses toward thankfulness collide with the frightening, tragic, and dis-spiriting news of the day.

On a recent Sunday, while leading a congregation in the liturgy of the Eucharist, I read these lines: "It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God . . ." At that point, I nearly lost my place in the liturgy as the week's leading headline flooded into my mind at that very moment: "Army Psychiatrist Goes On Shooting Rampage: 13 Dead, Many Injured At Ft. Hood."

"At all times and in all places give thanks"? What pious prattle!" was the cry of my heart. "How on earth do we do that?" How, indeed. Sometimes the disturbing news isn't in the newspapers. Sometimes it's in our neighborhood, our work, or our families. Sometimes the distressing news concerns someone whom we have trusted who has betrayed our trust. Sometimes it comes in the form of a terrifying mood: a panic attack, or debilitating melancholy. Sometimes it is conveyed to us by men or women in uniforms exiting a government sedan and solemnly walking up to our door with devastating news. And sometimes the news is so disturbing that "evil" is the only word we can find to describe what has happened.

How do we give thanks then? At those times we are in the position of the Hebrew people in the year 586 B.C.E. The Babylonian empire had razed the Temple in Jerusalem and the people were exiled into what is modern day Iraq. One of their poets wrote:

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our lyres.

For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying,

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the

Lord's song in a foreign land?" *

Disturbing news often has the effect of exiling us from our equanimity and our gratitude. At those times we are "strangers in a strange land." We cannot rejoice. Thankfulness is not upon our tongues. So we do what they did, I suppose. We weep. Or perhaps we rage.** We begin wherever we are in our hearts. We mourn: with sadness and anger; with expressions of disbelief and confusion. We do not pretend. We affirm where we are. And, if we are wise, we do all this in the presence of others who know . . . who've been there . . . or are there. We do not isolate ourselves . . . we hold one another tight in the embrace of empathic conversation. And we search out memory's store as we look for meaning, for understanding, for solace. We compare notes drawn from our experience with the experience of others. And even as we may tremble in the present, we consult the wisdom of the past, in the hope of forging a bridge toward tomorrow. This is something people have done for countless generations. It's the "traditional" way of handling the collision of our thankfulness with those distressing events in our lives.

The composer Gustav Mahler once observed: "Tradition is the preservation of fire, not the worship of ashes." Beginning where we are; expressing honestly what is in us; comparing notes with caring others; opening ourselves to accumulated wisdom . . . all this kindles, restores, and preserves the fire of gratitude . . . and leads us toward healing, health, and wholeness. I am thankful that I can still sometimes lead in the traditional celebrations of public worship. Even more than that, I am grateful to be one of those who enters with others into this traditional way of searching for the fire of hopeful thanksgiving amidst the ashes of disappointment, disillusionment, and despair.

And I am thankful for my colleagues at PCNV who do the same. If this season of thanksgiving finds you overwhelmed by distressing news and sifting through too many ashes, all of them stand ready to walk beside you.

* Psalm 137:1-4

** Read the entire Psalm and note the change from sadness and loss to rage, beginning with verse 7. This Psalm gives raw expression to human emotion. Certainly not prescriptive in nature, its inclusion in the Bible suggests that all emotions and thoughts have their place in human life, even though all actions do not.

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