

Grateful Hearts – Sermon for Thanksgiving 2018 by Sister Monica Clare

The first time I heard about the intentional practice of gratitude was 20 years ago when I entered Al-Anon, which is a 12-Step Program for the families and friends of Alcoholics and Addicts. One of the practices that we were taught in Al Anon was to start each day with a gratitude list, where we would write down three things that we were grateful for.

At first it wasn't easy. My life was difficult and stressful and full of problems, or so I thought. What did I have to be thankful for? And so I started by writing down simple things like "I'm grateful that I got up on time." "I'm grateful that my cats are not sick."

Over time, much to my surprise, I slowly began to realize that there were thousands of things to be grateful for every day. Eventually I realized there were actually millions, and millions upon millions of things to be thankful for every day, and that those things vastly outnumbered the negative things in my life.

Public interest in the practice of gratitude has grown tremendously in the 20 years since I first heard of it. It has captured the public's imagination not only as a popular spiritual practice but also as an important element in the field of positive psychology which was pioneered by Dr. Martin Seligman.

Gratitude has also become the subject of serious research for neuroscientists, and now there is a plethora of studies, and books and scholarly articles out there on the actual, quantifiable benefits of being grateful. It has been found to increase happiness and reduce depression and PTSD. It's been shown to enhance empathy and reduce aggression and, not surprisingly, it has also been found to improve physical health and reduce chronic pain.

At the Last Supper our Lord gave thanks before he broke the bread and explained to the disciples that it was his body, broken for us. He also gave thanks when he showed his disciples the wine and explained that it was his blood, shed for us. Before the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus first stopped, looked up to heaven and gave thanks. After he had raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus looked up and said "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."

Throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and in our own liturgical life, we are reminded over and over to give thanks because it is a right and a good and a joyful thing.

My own practice of gratitude has evolved over the years from writing down just three measly items on a list into expressing a constant stream of gratitude throughout the day. Instead of just saying I'm grateful, though, I now say "Thank you, God" every time something goes right, every time I see something beautiful and I every time I see an act of kindness. Sister Victoria has taught me to also thank God every time something goes wrong, and to thank Him for the lesson in it.

Scientists have found that over time, the act of being grateful actually reroutes the neural pathways in our brains and changes our thought patterns from a vicious cycle to what's called a virtuous cycle, and I can certainly attest to this from my own experience. If I'm upset or stressed out and I take time to quickly think of three things to thank God for, it immediately switches my energy from depression to joy, from anxiety to calm and most importantly – from fear to faith.

When we change our brains, I think we change our energy, and when we change our energy from negative to positive, I believe that energy can be felt by the people around us.

Because of this, I believe not only that gratitude has the power to change us as individuals, but that it also has the power to change the world.

So on this day of Thanksgiving, let us remember always, and everywhere to give thanks.