

Our spiritual practice for today is gratitude. We will begin this practice with a prayer by John Phillips Newell,

For the freshness of this new day, thanks be to you, O God.

For morning's gift of clarity, in light like the first day's dawn, thanks be to you.

In this newborn light, let us see afresh.

In this gateway onto what has never been before, let our souls breathe hope for the earth, for the creatures, for the human family.

Let our souls breathe hope.

Amen

What evokes gratitude? Diana Butler Bass in her book, *Grateful*, writes:

Gratitude is not about stuff.

Gratitude is the emotional response to the surprise of our very existence, to sensing that inner light and realizing the astonishing sacred, social, and scientific events that brought each one of us into being. We cry out like the psalmist, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" (Ps. 139:14) Life itself is the gift. Grateful people feel life to be a gift.

Sounds good, right? But gratitude is a feeling – and feeling is great when you feel good, but what about when you are not? How do you experience gratitude when feelings are elusive or negative?

Gratitude is more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be *chosen* and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions – it is an ethic. By ethic, we mean a framework of principles by which we live more fully in the world. This ethic involves developing habits and practices of gratefulness that changes us for the better. Gratitude involves not only what we feel, but also what we do. Gratitude is both a feeling and a choice. This is why we "practice" gratitude.

If we practice gratefulness, it becomes a natural and normal way of engaging with the world. With gratitude, our hearts open toward one another. It can shape who we are.

We can choose to focus on our failures or our losses. We can choose anger, fear, resentment, grief and pain. When we neglect gratitude, we are, in effect, making a choice toward negative emotions, which in turn foster more negativity. To choose gratitude is to hear an inner urging toward thanks, to be aware of the grace in life, and to respond. We might be grateful persons, with thankful hearts, but as soon as we turn on the news, we realize we are at odds with the world in which we live.

The key to fostering an attitude of gratitude is to practice it regularly. Anne Kertz Kernion, in her book *Spiritual Practices for the Brain*, lists suggestions to help us practice gratitude.

- Keep a gratitude journal. Recall the gifts that have come your way. Read it later and savor those moments. Be on the lookout for gifts throughout the week
- Seek out prayers of gratitude. These are powerful sources of inspiration. Use Psalms 23, 34, 103 or any devotional.
- Use all your senses – taste, sight, touch, smell and hearing – to appreciate the miracle of being alive. Focus on the gifts you receive through that particular lens. Take a few deep breaths outside to enjoy the natural scents. Savor meals. Slow down and enjoy these every day gifts our senses bring to us.

- Set up visual reminders. I set up shells and rocks from my travels in every room to remind me to be grateful – not only for the vacation spots but for the diversity of nature. Post gratitude quotes on your computer. Display pictures of people who are especially dear to you.
- Smile, look people in the eye, and say thank you. Write thank you notes and letters. Seize every opportunity to express your gratitude with others – the effects can ripple out to many more.
- Create a gratitude jar. Write down blessings that have come your way. Read the notes at a family dinner to spread an attitude of gratitude to all at the table. Read the notes when you are not feeling grateful to reset your choice.

We will close with an excerpt from Diana Butler Bass' Thanksgiving Prayer.

GOD, there are many days we do not feel grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak and confusing. When there are threats, injustice, violence, and war.

We struggle to feel grateful.

But today, we choose gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, for their stories and struggles; we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, accepting them for who they are. We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We choose to appreciate and care for our neighbors whatever our differences or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to see the world as our shared commons, our home now and the legacy we will leave to the generations to come.

God, we do not give thanks. We choose it.

We will make this choice of thanks with courageous hearts, knowing that it is humbling to say "thank you." We choose to open ourselves to your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an unending circle of gratitude.

We pledge to make thanks. We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future.

We choose thanks.

Resource:

- Psalms for Praying, Nan C. Merrill
- Grateful, Diana Butler Bass
- Spiritual Practices for the Brain, Anne Kertz Kernion
- The Spiritual Practices of Gratitude, Pathways Retreat

"If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do is be present in the present... gratefully."

— Maya Angelou

"If the only prayer you said in your whole life was "thank you", that would be enough."

— Meister Eckhart