

FOR LIFE THAT ENFOLDS US

A homily preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland on November 24, 2013.

Once there was a woman who was determined to cheer up her life by creating the perfect holiday season for her and others. She went about it with a vengeance as she was determined to do everything by the book. First she held a lavish Thanksgiving Dinner for twenty members of her family. Some family members were even a little surprised to have been invited, but they came and everyone had a tolerably good time.

Then she started on Christmas. She began early by making all of her own decorations. She planned and carried out an elegant dinner party, hand lettering the invitations, the menu, and cooking a magnificent meal for twenty-five people. She personally decorated all of the ornaments on her large tree. She organized a carol sing for all of her non-religious friends. She carefully selected and sent off gifts to fifteen of her closest relatives. It was just by the book. It was going so well. She kept thinking, "I must really be getting the holiday spirit!"

Three days before Christmas she awoke in the morning with a start. She realized she had forgotten to buy and send Christmas cards. As soon the stores opened she hit the malls, and after half a day of searching she found only four boxes of Xmas cards left in the entire community. The picture on the front of the box was quite acceptable, however, so she raced home with them and spent the afternoon writing personal messages on the back of each card. She mailed them just before the post office closed.

When she got home she became a little curious about the holiday message printed on the other side of the card that she had just sent out to all her friends. She realized that in her haste to get things done perfectly, she hadn't actually read it yet. She found she had one card left, and she opened it. The message on the other side said, "THIS IS JUST A NOTE TO SAY A GREAT BIG GIFT IS ON ITS WAY."

I remember this story now for two reasons. The first is that people who go to an enormous effort to "make" a holiday happen usually find out that their effort to force things comes around to bite them in the end.

November and December are months when we can try to take our emotional temperature in ways that do not always work well. For example, we are tempted to measure our well being through the eyes of other people. We look to those around us to be a mirror, reflecting back to us whether we are loved and cared for or whether we feel important.

The problem is sometimes the people from whom we hope to receive that reflection of ourselves are at low levels of strength themselves, and it may turn out they need more from us than they can give to us right then. It's not always wise for us to use other people as a barometer of whether or not life is being good to us.

This happens particularly at holidays. Every January I used to ask members of my congregation, "So how was your holiday?" More often than not the answer was "It was OK," meaning "No one got shot; no one got arrested; we kept the family fights to a minimum and maybe, once again, we got our hopes a little too high wishing for an experience of peace and love that transcends everything we know about human nature. Sometimes it is best to find a mood of

gratitude or thankfulness first from within ourselves rather than hoping that others will bring it home to us.

It has been said, “A thankful person is thankful under all circumstances. A complaining soul complains even if he lives in paradise.” What does it mean for us to be “Thankful under all circumstances?” Surely there are times when we wonder if the person who is “Thankful under all circumstances” really understands the situation correctly.

We might wonder could this be someone who happens to be materially well off but is also too shallow to realize that others do not have quite the same material reasons to be grateful? But to measure our ability or need to be thankful by a standard of what we can buy is to deliberately look away from the deeper issues of gratitude for what life has given us most importantly. If we say, “Well, he should be thankful, he’s rich” or what “what does she have to be thankful for, she’s poor,” we accept material wealth as the only way we define our spiritual lives and celebrations.

How will we measure gratitude this year? How will we know for what to be thankful? Since the holiday season does not always seem to bring out the best in everyone, where do we turn? My strong conviction is that real gratitude does not come from gifts we hope to have or think we should have but from gifts that have already been given.

That’s my second point this morning and the central point of my personal theology. The “great big gifts” have already been given. When we really know that the gifts have been given – and even without regard to whether we deserved them -- we can enter into our own mood of gratefulness. Here’s what I mean, and I know I’ve used some of these examples before but then this is my last Thanksgiving with you.

Whoever nurtured your sense of humor gave you the gift of life itself? Humor is the gift that enables you to survive. Whoever encouraged you as a learner – your parents, grandparents, a teacher – gave you the gift of competence. Who instilled in you a sense of justice and injustice? Who loved you into believing in yourself? It may not have been the person you think it should have been, but someone did, and that is something to cherish.

Who first encouraged you to try to love a person outside of your family? However anxious and brief that first loving relationship it was a first step in risking yourself and because you took that step you may have learned how to do it better.

Who ran along beside your two-wheeler until you could balance it on your own? Who kept tossing balls to you until you learned to catch them? When you were away from home and desperately homesick who helped you not to quit and give into that homesickness? When bullies invaded your life who told you with considerable authority that they were not worthy of your time and concern? Who taught you that failures are an inevitable feature on the road to growing up?

All of these gifts of life are so incredible in their power to shape who we are and yet so simple that they come and go unannounced, and the people who gave them may not even be aware what they’ve done for us.

Last year I spoke of the little things in our lives, some of them accidents of fate, that are easily overlooked at first and sometimes even unintended but our history records they were extremely important. When our first child was born, the delivery room nurse wrapped him up and then turned to hand him to me. Since I was a delivery room neophyte I was a little concerned

about hygiene and so I said, “But what about my germs?” The nurse was tired. This particular delivery had taken much of the night. And out of that fatigue she replied, “He’s going home with you, isn’t he.” I’ve never forgotten and have benefitted greatly from the implicit message about the inherent strength of our children and most children.

My grandparents meeting one another on a Boston trolley was another fortuitous accident that was a gift to me and my brother. I’m even quite grateful for every relationship I had with a girl that didn’t quite work out, because through that relationship I learned something about myself and about love and partnership from every one of them.

How can we measure gratitude this year? There has been so much love bestowed on all of our lives. We also find it in the beauty of the fall, in the warmth and ease of summer and in the clear crisp mornings of a winter’s day. We find it in the majesty of a New England coastline or of a mountain range and in the wild places where we go to restore our spirits.

We find it in the gift of music that draws us out of ourselves and into another world. We find it in the generosity of friends and the kindness of strangers, and none of this love comes to us announced or heralded or set aside so that we should have to notice it. Sometimes we require special moments to capture our attention. Here is another story.

During the Nineteen Thirties, while French soldiers and civilians were stationed in North Africa, some of them became fascinated with the Arab Moors, who were living there. These Arabs were men who lived in a harsh, demanding landscape where paying strict attention to the simplest things – to the subtlest changes of light and wind – could make the difference between life and death.

These were men who traveled several days across burning sands to reach a small spring and a few palm trees. They had, in effect, emptied their minds of a lot of the desires that fill ours. They had learned to find happiness in things so commonplace we would never notice them.

The French couldn’t resist trying to impress these stoic Arabs, and so they took a group of them on a tour of France to dazzle them with the glitter and the benefits of European civilization. But the Arabs were not particularly moved by the Eiffel Tower or by locomotives pulling long trains or by the steamships on the Seine. What did impress them – beyond all imagining – was something the Europeans took for granted.

It was a waterfall, cascading down the side of a tree-covered mountain. They who had always thought of water as one way in which God’s love was very sparingly given to humankind now gazed uncomprehendingly at this extravagance. Extravagance was all they could think that it was. They would not turn away. They would not leave. They told their guide they were waiting for the waterfall to stop, as surely it must in order to end this waste of water. When they were told that the waterfall had been flowing for hundreds and hundreds of years, they shook their heads at God’s unending madness.

How will we measure the love that comes into our lives? How will we know for what to be grateful? Let us remember we have been recipients of Life’s incredible generosity – God’s unending madness -- and there probably are not enough Thanksgivings for us to acknowledge what we have been given; including what we have been given by people who – to this day – do not know how much we have received from them. Let us be grateful for this unending madness and all of the graces that flow into our lives from it.

Each year people ask me for something like a table grace for Thanksgiving. This is one.

Spirit of Life, eternal God, We are more grateful than our words can express for the blessings that have flowed into our lives – blessings of friends and family, blessings of shared happiness and comfortable solitude, blessings of beauty and inspiration that come from very ordinary things. And we are grateful for the blessing of strength to meet what needs to be met. Help us to greet each morning as if it were about to unfold everything worth reaching for, everything to be hoped and everyone to be loved.

Keep us aware of how much of our lives we are not living and how many of our values we are not serving. And in this way help us to recognize that other gifts await us. AMEN.