

A reflection on Gratitude

By Archbishop Anne Germond

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In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes:

“Be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5: 18b-20)

Gratitude. An attitude of thankfulness.

To be perfectly honest with you I didn't much like her when we were first introduced; she's not the kind of person you warm up to right away. It takes time and life, before she (or maybe it's a he in your case), becomes a part of you.

Did you remember to say 'thank you' to Aunty Jean for the lovely (it was awful) necklace she brought you back from her trip to Spain? Wasn't it nice of Uncle James to bring us these chocolates – did you remember to thank him?

From then on it seemed she was there, Gratitude, always pushing her way into my life. No one could lift a fork or knife at dinner time before we had given thanks: “For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen.” And before bedtime, after our rooms were tidied and the lights were out, there she was again, kneeling next to mum: “Thank you God for mom and dad, for Helen and Paul, and granny, and all of our friends who are kind to us and help us.” There was no party without her barging in, pushing her way to the front of my life again right after the candles had been blown out and the last gift had been opened.

My parents were always there to remind us, just in case we forgot to say thank you. “One day you won't forget” they'd say, “Having gratitude around will be second nature; a part of you.”

So good friend of the family, and constant, if sometimes awkward companion of my earliest years Gratitude skipped along beside me when I started school.

It was there I learned that showing friend Gratitude around was very useful. She'd say: “Your teachers will be impressed that you know me.” And she was right. Gratitude was always there to give me a helping hand when I wanted something or needed something, and I was good at using her to my advantage. Those two little magic words, *please* and *thank you*, were able to open up just about any door. It was amazing what people would do for a child, a teenager, when those words were used. Even my mother smiled at how much Gratitude had become a part of my life.

But then something strange happened. Gratitude started showing up when I least expected her to. Like the time I accidentally reversed my dad's car into a tree after

a youth group meeting and lived through the ordeal. All my dad wanted to know was : Are you okay; is everyone in the car okay? And the time a boy invited me out to a movie and we held hands and kissed in the back row – just like in the song. This boy liked me and called the next day to say that he'd had a good time too. And the time I went camping with a group of friends and we saw the most awesome sunset. 'I didn't expect to see you way out here,' I said to Gratitude. "Oh yes" she replied; "This is one of my favourite views as well. I've stood here with millions of people about this time of day."

It was gratitude that helped me through High School and then through Teacher's College, and there were many times, such as graduation or standing in front of my very own class of children, or on my wedding day that I realized that those two magic words no longer seemed sufficient to express to the people who'd coached me and introduced me to Gratitude that I really was thankful. The best way to show thanks she'd say, was just to do my best. And so I tried. Whenever I look back on those years, I can't do so without Gratitude.

So there she was popping in and out of my life at odd times. I didn't invite her or cultivate her, because she doesn't come naturally. You must be taught to live with Gratitude. "Say thank you to the lady for the candy", they tell you when you're young. "Say thank you to God", they teach us in church.

Then comes that day when nobody has to tell you to be grateful, you just are. Gratitude has gotten inside you. Is you.

And twice, in the middle of winter, as we held our tiny infant babies in our arms for the first time, we wondered how on earth we could be so blessed, so lucky, there was Gratitude who greeted us first. "I'll be going now" she said "But don't forget me when you're doing the 2am feeding, or pacing the floor when he's 16 and taken the car out on a Saturday night. Don't forget, he's a gift" I tried not to and when I did knew that Gratitude would always be there to remind me.

If I look through my photo albums I have so many reminders of Gratitude in my life. She was there, in every family photo, as we have traveled back to South Africa for holidays and reunions. And I see Gratitude every day in Algoma as we make our journey of faith together.

But Paul says to us: "Always and for everything give thanks". Isn't this a bit much to ask? I don't mind having Gratitude there for Christmas dinner, or on one of those very special occasions when it's the proper time and the proper place. But always? Everywhere? In every situation?

Every life knows dark days when Gratitude is the last person you want to drop by. It's not that we don't like her or want her, it's just that there is a time and a place for everything. *"A time to laugh and a time to weep. A time to rejoice and a time to*

refrain from rejoicing" (Ecclesiastes 3) Surely there are times and places when the last thing that ought to be said is "Thanks"?

Just think for a minute about the past 18 months. Pandemic. Suffering. Death. Isolation. The killing of George Floyd. Raging forest fires in BC and Europe this summer due to climate change. Two Michaels unfairly imprisoned in China. The discovery of the remains of indigenous children in unmarked graves. Anger. Hurt. Rage. Depression are all appropriate guests, but not Gratitude. She could come by later, when the crying is done, and the wound has begun to heal. But not now, not when so much suffering holds court.

I found out that my father had died when I returned home from church one Sunday over 20 years ago after a group of children at the parish I served had just made their first communion at a beautiful service of Eucharist (meaning Thanksgiving). It was the 2nd Sunday in Advent. We'd been celebrating with Gratitude, and I was planning my trip the following week to Johannesburg for Christmas. I knew it would be dad's last Christmas but I was going with Gratitude and that would make all the difference. But now there wouldn't be a last visit with dad – only blame at not going sooner, hurt, and pain. As soon as I got over the initial shock I went downstairs and the first person I saw was Gratitude. Looking at me straight in the eye, and with a voice that just mimicked my dad's – "Say thank you to God for me".

And Gratitude refused to leave the house that day. Soon people were dropping by and we were passing around the albums with Gratitude in them – dad holding me on my baptism day, at a school prize giving when I was elected headgirl, on my wedding day and holding his grandchildren. And we began to laugh and cry at the same time as we talked about how grateful dad was when Colin took me off his hands!

And then I understood. I didn't want Gratitude to leave after all. Gratitude belonged in my life at all times and in all places. That has meant I needed Gratitude as much as I have journeyed with Colin through his cancer treatments over the last 13 years as I have in all the high points and happy moments of life. And Gratitude has been present in each and every one. Life just wouldn't be right without Gratitude.

Paul was right you know. It is not only possible, but **necessary**, that we should "always and for everything" give thanks. The presence of Gratitude transforms even the darkest nights into glorious day.

For all of us, there is nowhere we go that Gratitude doesn't belong.
Amen.