



How do we give thanks in the midst of loss?

Naturally, most of us enjoy giving thanks at Thanksgiving for the good things of life.

But what if Thanksgiving rolls around this year, and all we can remember is loss? A few days ago, for instance, barely a week before Thanksgiving, I did a funeral service for another child who had died. We know, most of us do, that death is inevitable in this life; but none of us is prepared when a child dies before his parents do.

I think of other deaths during this past year. As Thanksgiving rolls around this year, some places at the table will be empty. Some good people died this year, some truly good people died. Some of us lost a marriage recently; even if we knew divorce was necessary, we still lost something. Some of us had children leave home, or friends leave town.

Some of us lost jobs this year, even as the economy was trying to sputter back to life. Some of us had business deals fall through, sales that didn't happen. Some of us lost cases, or made poor investments, or lost our appeals.

And some of us simply lost a few inspiring dreams and hopes. What we expected in the Spring has faded in the Fall. What we hoped for in the Summer, even if we knew it was a long shot, is cold and forgotten as Winter arrives. We live with as many lost hopes as we do lost realities.

How, then, do we give thanks in the midst of loss? Well, we do it the same way we give thanks in the midst of gain. We think outside of ourselves; we think bigger than ourselves. *Giving thanks* means being willing to focus attention on something or *Someone* larger than ourselves. It is hard, if not impossible, to give thanks to a non-entity, to give thanks to No One.

I am thinking, of course, of God as that Someone who is larger than ourselves. And even if some of us do not believe in God, we usually give thanks to someone outside ourselves – to a friend or family member. But the point is that *giving thanks* necessarily leads us to

think outside of ourselves. When things are going well, it is good and healthy to give away self-centeredness and self-absorption; it is good to focus attention on someone else.

The same principle is true when things are not going well. To give thanks in the midst of loss is to focus attention outside ourselves. I do not mean thanking God for something gone bad, or for some tragedy. I do not think God wills tragedy and senseless loss. But God does know loss. And God does know the pain of our sadness when we lose. The God I love and believe in, is the God who knows the height of my elation, but who also knows the depth of my loss.

Following ancient Jewish tradition, I have always thought that *giving thanks* is related to *blessing*. For instance, we Christians bless the bread and wine of Eucharist by giving thanks for God in a prayer called *The Great Thanksgiving*. At mealtimes, many of us say a prayer whose title alternates between *The Blessing* and *Returning Thanks*. We use two different titles for the same prayer over food because, indeed, blessing and giving thanks are related.

To give thanks is to bless. When we ask God to bless our successes in life, we are thanking God for being present in the midst of those events. In the same way, we can also ask God to bless our failures in life. When we ask God to bless our losses, we are thanking God for being present in the midst of those events.

Thanksgiving, then, means blessing God as we remember both the gains and the losses of this past year. Bring both the gains and the losses to the Thanksgiving table this year; bring successes and failures. As you ask God to bless those events, even the most painful ones can be transformed. They will be transformed by a divine love, a holy presence, a peace, that passes all understanding.

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