

A theologian and expert on medical ethics was invited to read a paper at a theological gathering. He agreed on the condition that his respondent would be from the medical profession. When the paper had been read, the physician, dean of a prominent medical school, stood up and began by insisting that he was not a religious person.

He went on to say that to him life was a precious gift to be cherished and nurtured, in ourselves and in others. It was his sense of the sheer gift of human existence that motivated him in his vocation as a doctor, and he found that it challenged him to put first the care of human life and health.

Sheer gift in theological language is called grace. Grace is that which is freely given, the delight taken in the gift, and the thanksgiving offered up for it.

The one lesson that suits us, says Christian Bobin, is that in this life everything is given to us, every instant, blue with black, strength with hurt. There is only one sadness we might encounter: how to receive life and not darken it with the feeling that something is owed us. Great art is the art of thankfulness for the abundance of every moment.

Life as sheer gift has a shadow side. Job knew it well:

Naked I came out of my mother's womb,
and naked shall I return to mother earth.
The Lord has given and the Lord has taken.
May the Lord's name be blessed.

Lazarus' untimely death is the backdrop for our story (John 12:1-8). I suppose death is timely, sometimes, but more often, I suspect, it strikes us a premature. The time is always shorter than we expect. It was certainly shorter for Lazarus than Mary thought it should be.

Mary angrily confronted Jesus about delaying his coming and allowing her brother to die. Now, that Lazarus is alive and well, Mary is grateful beyond words. She bathes Jesus' feet with very expensive perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. The scent of the perfume not only fills the house, but permeates Mary's hair long after the dinner concludes.

Judas is not happy that such extravagance has deprived the poor of a hot meal. He is not, Luke assures us, concerned about the poor but about his loss. He would help himself to a healthy commission for handling the money. Jesus tells Judas to back off and then does something very interesting. Mary's expression of gratitude becomes, in Jesus' defense of her, preparation for his death and burial.

Jesus reveals that his life will be cut short. He will be dead and gone, no longer with them, within a week. Judas measures life by the bottom line, his bottom line, and betrays Jesus for money. Mary measures life by love shared and Jesus is grateful for her extravagance.

Whatever time we have, we have as gift. Is there any better way to receive this gift than with expressions of gratitude, occasionally with extravagant acts of love? Daily expressions of appreciation for others, in addition to honoring the gift life is, prepares us for the day that will inevitably arrive for all of us?

A Scottish bishop with a lifetime of pastoral experience observed: the primary emotion we feel at the end of a *long* life should be gratitude. He knew people who died in a mood of absolute gratitude for the life they'd lived and the love that was given to them. The opposite of gratitude for life, he noted, is greed for more of it.

I sometimes wonder about greed for more, when we often struggle to know what to do with the time we have. It is also curious how, when we believe our time may be cut short, we think of all the things we would like to do but haven't. While we do not know the number of our days, we can know a gratitude that enriches the day we have.

What moved Denise Levertov forward into faith was her profound sense of gratitude for life. She explains: *More and more strongly as the years passed, and despite whatever grief and losses those years brought to my private life, despite, too, my constant and often intense awareness of the tensions, disasters, cruelties and overwhelming threats of this period in history, I experienced a welling-up of gratitude for life itself and for many extraordinary blessings in my own history . . .*

To what, to whom? Gratitude implies an object; and not merely an impersonal force but a giver. A belief in blind chance, in luck, does not give rise to the sensation of gratitude as I experience it. She gives expression to this belief in a poem.

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention . . .
along with a host of diversions . . .

And then

once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.

Denise was diagnosed with lymphoma. She always had a sense of the perishability of life, but not a preoccupation with death. For her, God was an artist, a creator, a giver who in making humans would never give up on what had been created. She knew that a distancing from God could be overcome by a return to gratitude. Gratitude was the key to faith.