

Spiritual Aerobics

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Did you grow up with a ritual of giving thanks for the food before meals? Maybe it was a scripted prayer, or an impromptu prayer, or, perhaps like my kids, you made it fun by singing blessing songs that you learned from church camp.

When I was a child, my siblings and I dutifully folded our hands before every supper that we ate together and my father would say the Anglican prayer he learned as a child, “for that which we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.” To which we all replied, “Amen.” Over the years my father’s blessings have evolved, more creative and perhaps a wee bit longer – mom nudges him to bring it to a close.

No matter how difficult life seems to be getting, or how plain the food looks on our plates, we remember to say “Thank you.”

Sometimes, though, I don’t feel like saying “Thank you” to God. Similarly the kid or adult doesn’t feel thankful when bullied on the schoolyard or in the workplace. I don’t burst with gratitude during a week when everything seems to be going wrong. So, what does it mean to “rejoice always” or to “make a joyful noise”¹ to God? How do we sincerely *make a joyful noise* in gratitude while always remaining attentive to unjust systems and suffering around us?

Taking a look again at Miriam. She likely twice witnessed the salvation of Moses from the water. Was Miriam there when baby Moses was left in a basket to float in the river, taken up by Pharaoh’s daughter? Years later Moses and Israelites are delivered from certain death - Miriam sings, dances, and plays a tambourine in gratitude. Moses gives thanks, but Miriam, she and the women play their instruments – they **dance**. Miriam *embodies the victory* of the oppressed over the oppressor in a language that amplifies the words of Moses’ song.

The *language of the body* – movement, drumbeat the clash of cymbals – *physically, celebrates their liberation, and God’s triumph*. Miriam is considered a prophet because in the Bible, a prophet has the special status of truth-teller, one who urges the people to obey God. This “joyful noise” of Miriam speaks of the priceless Gifts God has given the people. She takes the song of Moses and makes it into a refrain: frames the song of Moses by making a refrain of his first line,

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”²

In her dance and celebration, she echoes the wisdom of Psalm 100, “Know that...God...made us”³ (v. 3) and not we ourselves; know that we are God’s people, and this is God’s saving act. Who are our prophets in our modern time, who embody

¹ Psalm 100, verse 1

² Exodus 15, verse 1

³ Psalm 100, verse 3

thanksgiving for God's blessings for God's children? This is another glimpse of what God's unconditional Love looks like.

Therefore, says Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians, "Give thanks in all circumstances"⁴. Paul does not limit those circumstances to the good things of life, such as liberation from oppression, full bellies, or a good harvest. If we are to give thanks "in all circumstances," if that is what constitutes true rejoicing and rest in Christ, then we cannot insulate ourselves from our flaws and disappointments even when we dance and sing for joy as did Miriam with the women.

"Am I to be grateful when things are *not* going my way?" "You want me to take up my tambourine when my plate is empty, when life has handed me the pits instead of the cherries?" Or, some of us might ask, "Am I to turn in gratitude to God when I enjoy too many privileges, while others barely eke out a living?"

Giving thanks in blessing and curse is like patting your head and rubbing your stomach, both at the same time. (*Maybe the congregation would like to try this.*) Can it be done without confusing or blending the two? It takes focus – concentration.

It may be worth remembering that the biblical call to "rejoice always" is for all times, including times when we feel like our spiritual glass is half empty. I'll refer again to the Diana Butler Bass book "Grateful"⁵ and study after study revealing how an attitude of gratitude needs to be cultivated. That means, regularly paying attention to why we are thankful, even in, perhaps especially, when things aren't going well.

It's worth noting that Miriam's joy is less like a victory dance that you might see a pro football or hockey player indulge in after a touchdown or goal. Instead, we realize that Miriam is more like an underdog whom God delivered from what seemed like defeat. Does God not want us to rejoice, not out of obligation, nor our mindless praise, but perhaps in this act of giving thanks to God, we come together into relationship with God. We and Miriam know God's saving grace. We begin to know, with Miriam, that God triumphs gloriously, our source of love and community – a Love that endures forever.

This Stewardship program, we hope, will connect us with gratitude, and as we do to bring our whole selves, body and mind, in thanksgiving. Dancing and playing tambourines, Miriam and friends respond to blessing with a kind of spiritual aerobics. Full body expression of gratitude. Aerobics take practice, so as we go from here may we practice full body and soul thanksgiving as we remember again and again God's love for all Creation that endures forever.

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 18

⁵ *Grateful*. ©2018 Diana Butler Bass. HarperCollins