

Just Gratitude

Ezekiel 34:17-22; Matthew 25:31-46

Americans, in my estimation, have a great deal for which to be thankful in this season. I look back over the last half dozen years or so and recall how difficult it was for many households during the recent recession and how much better off we are now in comparison. For that reason alone, we should be grateful.

The evidence of improvement is all around us. On many fronts, Americans are enjoying the blessings of a recovered economy that is producing record highs on Wall Street, lower unemployment rates, rising wages, and an annual cost of living that hasn't been at this level since 1964!

Add to that, economists tell us industrial production is at an all time high,¹ the GNP (Gross National Product) is a healthy 3.5%, and the federal budget deficit has dropped by a trillion dollars over the past five years. More Americans have health insurance than at any other time, October's job gains marked the ninth consecutive month surpassing 200,000 new jobs—the longest stretch of positive growth in employment in two decades, and the price of oil and gas have dropped to levels we *used to* complain about in the good old days when it was under \$3 a gallon. Go figure.

Yet, with all this positive news on the economic front (some of it being the best we've ever seen in our nation's history!), why are Americans across the board so unhappy and dissatisfied with the way things are? According to a recent Gallup poll, only twenty percent are happy and content with the state of affairs in this country, while 77%

¹ "The Economy at a Glance," *Insperity.com*, November 2014.

are dissatisfied and unhappy. That's nearly 8 out of every 10 people who are upset and cranky!

Yet, if change was what people were looking for, then it certainly wasn't expressed at the voting booth. The midterm election three weeks ago had the lowest turnout in 72 years with only 36% of registered voters filling out a ballot! That's not a mandate for anyone! You would think the governing party would benefit from such great economic news. Yet, exits polls indicated that voters weren't impressed and didn't expect much to change in Washington or elsewhere. The President's approval rating hovers around 40% and the public's favorable view of Congress is down to almost single digits. Life would appear to be relatively good, yet the credit doesn't seem to be bestowed upon those who govern us.

So what's going on? Why is America a land of such discontent? Would we prefer to turn back the clock and relive the past five years? I doubt it. Was the first decade of this century better when we were overwhelmed by fears and insecurities in the wake of 9-11 and engaged in the horrors of two wars? You tell me. Or is it the 1980s or the 1990s or some other period that we consider the "Golden Age" in our individual and collective memories? Given the current state of affairs, on what basis is the present time worse than before, enough so that nearly 80% of Americans are unhappy and dissatisfied?

Some of this, of course, is due to the political discourse going on in our country. It could be, people are unhappy because it's hard to shake a bad attitude. The American public is so used to hearing about how terrible everything is that they can't trust good news when it comes. Complaining is habit-forming.

I remember how my parents would react to my whining and dining at the Thanksgiving table. *Now listen, young man! You don't have anything to complain about. You don't like those lima beans and squash on your plate? Be grateful you have something on your plate! There are plenty of children around the world who are starving and would be delighted to eat squash and lima beans! So stop your complaining and be grateful for what you have!*

As much as I still don't like lima beans, I knew they had a point. Sometimes when you have a lot, comparatively speaking, you take things for granted. You cop an attitude when you have little reason to complain. Life is much better than we often perceive it to be. Life could be (and often is) a whole lot worse. So the moral for grumpy Americans in 2014 might be: grow up, stop complaining! Be grateful for what we have, even if we don't like it. Why? Because life only gets better with an attitude of gratitude—just gratitude.

There's much to be said about cultivating an attitude of gratitude. It does us all a lot of good, correcting (or at least balancing) our perspective on things.

However, I'm not sure that the discontent in this country can be summed up only in our collective ingratitude. What we see in the polls isn't just a hangover from the recession. There is something else going on which is a real justification for people's complaints.

When we look behind the economic numbers, it's apparent the proverbial "boats" aren't rising for everyone with the overall tide. The vast majority of Americans still feel financially vulnerable; they live paycheck to paycheck and a crisis or two from disaster.² Their

² Quentin Fottrell, "5 Reasons Americans are Unhappy," www.marketwatch.com, August 30, 2014.

household economy hasn't recovered nearly as well as the country has. Many are haunted by the economic collapse six years ago and fear yet another crash. They also see that the economic benefits achieved over the past few years have been concentrated and gone almost entirely to the top earners, which has only widened the income gap in this country to a size even larger than the days of the Robber Barons a century ago.³ Much unhappiness in this country stems from the fact that only a small percentage of wage-earners are doing well—those, of course, are the ones who are celebrated in the media for their achievements and success. Most people, though, in relative scale of income aren't doing much better than they were five, ten, even thirty years ago. The unfairness of it all only increases a sense of powerlessness and frustration among the American public.

The unfairness within our society is actually crippling the country's economic welfare, as well as our sense of justice and equality in this nation. The Middle Class and lower incomes (which are the majority of the consumers) are not seeing significant improvement in their incomes. Those in Generation X, as well as the Millennials, are not advancing ahead of their parents career-wise or financially; in many respects, they are entering the workforce with fewer prospects for pursuing their chosen vocations and for attaining financial security within their lifetime.

For a variety of reasons, many are wondering if the social contract that has been presumed in this country for generations is coming undone—that it no longer applies or safeguards our collective welfare. This social contract assumed that, despite our differences on

³ Eduardo Porter, "The Politics of Income Inequality," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2014.

so many levels, we as citizens all have an obligation to sacrifice some of our individual freedoms in order to be conscientiously responsible to our neighbors in order to form and live in a just and prospering society. The era of hopefulness coming out of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when social justice and equal opportunity and fairness were national aspirations and were reflected in social and economic policies is waning. Our young people are entering adulthood with a culture that is cynical to the belief of fairness and eager to allow the pursuit of wealth and individual license to be the central social values. Social responsibility is rarely taught now as a fundamental principle of society.

In addition, many of the institutions that championed service to humanity and lifted the plight of the poor and disadvantaged have lost their place in people's lives and credibility and in the public square—organized religion being one of them. The social contract of today has been largely pared down to a minimum from the days when it was generous in its protections; now it is more common to hear about unfettered freedom to do whatever one wants than to be considerate and responsible and fair to others in society. And, as a result, the very fabric of our society is fraying.

Let me put this into perspective. This has happened before and it will likely happen again. It's not as if the tenor of these times is unique or unusual. This is an old, old story. Human beings have always tended to forget the importance of social and economic justice if there was no accountability on doing it. Thus, formal and informal social contracts have been a part of civilization from the beginning. In biblical times, it was expressed as a covenant—stipulations made

between families and neighbors, tribes and clans, and between God and Israel, which outlined what each side would do to preserve one another's security and protect their interests. Social contracts and covenants outlined what was just and fair, what was considered morally right or wrong, and what was legal and illegal. They served to preserve communities, societies, and nations from harm, particularly from within. They were meaningful because everyone's welfare was at stake and protected, not just those with more powerful interests and ambitions.

You've heard me talk about this many times before. When powerful interests within ancient Israel exploited their advantages over those with less of a position or voice, prophets rose up to hold them accountable by calling them out and naming their crimes and injustices. This entire chapter of Ezekiel 34 (of which we read a part) is an example of a prophet inspired by God chastising the abuses by powerful people which harmed the economic and social wellbeing of those who were defenseless before them. Though it's not part of the lectionary passage, the chapter begins with a stinging indictment that still rings true to our day:

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. [i.e., you exploit people for your own profit and benefit]. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them...

Then with the words we just heard:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what

you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

Time and time again, prophets rose up to restate and reclaim the social contract Israel had with its own people, typically targeting with scorn those who, with their power and influence, ignored their covenant responsibilities by harming and exploiting their own people. It was all about them and not about what was best for their society.

Jesus made the same prophetic charge, except he made it even more explicit by referencing those who were so easily dismissed, stigmatized, and socially ostracized—the least of these: the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the stranger, the incarcerated. He wasn't satisfied with just a random act of charity to remember and include on occasion the least of these in one's life—it was a covenant obligation, a social contract, a moral demand to do this routinely.

What's notable about this parable in Matthew was that it was directed at those who thought they were above such “scum” of the earth—they never even noticed who was being left out of the blessings of life. When they did, they considered the least of these as deserving of their lot in life—that it wasn't the rich and mighty's responsibility to help a bunch of losers, who couldn't fend for themselves. Social responsibility wasn't a popular cause; the covenant God has with Israel—the social contract—didn't matter, since those in need of help were perceived as little more than worthless parasites upon society.

Yet, in Jesus' parable, the startling irony was, these mighty, arrogant, narcissistic, dismissive types who are found in every society—greedy for their own personal satisfaction and powerful interests, who honestly believe they have earned and deserve all the

benefits that wealth and power afford them—these were the ones who were condemned by God as worthless (I can hear the Ghost of Christmas Present preaching the same thing to Ebenezer Scrooge!). Why are people like this so worthless? They break the social, moral, and covenantal contract to care for one’s neighbor as oneself. They took advantage of every opportunity to improve their lot at the expense of others and called it “good business!”

The “royalty” of this world often create their own ultimate insignificance because they have sold their souls like Faust to satisfy their own appetites at the expense of others. They interpret and value justice only when it means, *just us!* They care little about how their private interests and appeasement impact the lives of others, because they’re completely oblivious to the suffering of the poor. It’s not even on their radar. Like the rich man who wanted Lazarus to come to hell to quench his thirst, they don’t recognize the toxic impact of their greed upon the world, even when their stories serve as a morality tale. They strive to be on top of the world, when in the end, all they sought for in life had a value that heaven simply doesn’t honor.

Friends, here we are in a time in history and a place of prosperity that really isn’t shared with all—where a relative few do extremely well and many still struggle to find sustaining security in life. Thanksgiving isn’t solely about being grateful for what we have; it also calls us to be just and fair in our relationships in community, in society—everywhere our lives intersect.

Thanksgiving has its best meaning in *just gratitude*—that’s what this season is about. Like the pilgrims, it’s about the kind of world we are creating and the covenant with others we will honor and

protect for the benefit of all. Being just, being grateful—just
gratitude. That's what it takes to find satisfaction—true happiness--
among people who live in a land that has so much more to give.

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