

# Grateful Book Study

We: Ethics Community and Politics

*“If you’re grateful, you’re not fearful, and if you’re not fearful, you’re not violent. If you’re grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people, and you are respectful to everybody, and that changes this power pyramid under which we live.” -- David Steindle-Rast*

## Chapter 7: The Grateful Society

*“May we not keep our blessings, but give them away.” -- Thom M. Shuman*

My mind wandered back to the New Testament, to an ancient hillside in Galilee, where Jesus had stood just above the crowds and uttered these blessings for the first time. Looking out at the poor, the weak, the oppressed, women, and slaves, he preached his radical Sermon on the Mount, proclaiming the promise of a new society. Although the words were so familiar to me because I had heard them all my life, when I stood up on the rocks in the middle of the Women’s March, I realized that Jesus’s sermon added up to one thing: “Blessed are all of you who are disregarded by the powerful, for you are God’s beloved community.

Gratitude is an emotion we experience as individuals, and we can each practice gratitude as a personal ethic, the foundation of a good life. Yet gratitude is inherently social; it always connects us as individuals to others. Communal gratitude looks and feels wonderful when festivity, play, and ecstasy draw us together. Just as personal gratefulness comprises both emotions and ethics, so does communal gratitude. The grateful-feeling community can--and should--lead to a grateful society. Feeling grateful is not only play, but it can be a form of politics. Gratitude is joy, and gratitude is justice.

True gratitude, real gratefulness, the kind of transformative thanksgiving that makes all things new, cannot be quiet in the face of injustice. If we embrace the sort of gratitude that changes our individual lives, it will revolutionize our political lives as well. We move from a personal ethic of gratefulness toward a public one. The “me” of gratitude must extend to the “we” of gratitude as an ethic, a vision of community based on habits and practices of grace and gifts, of cultivating a wide field of vision and deepening our awareness of humility and blessing, of setting tables and sharing food for all. Gratitude is not merely resilience. Gratitude is resistance too.

It is time for all of us to join the resistance.

**Blessed Community**

As I experienced that day at the Women's March, blessings and gratitude are intimately connected. Few of us are naturally thankful for things that appear to curse us! We give thanks for friends, health, provision, and love: blessings. We are blessed, and we are grateful.

But what are blessings? The English noun "Blessing" means "gift from God" and is derived from the verb "to bless," "to hallow, or to make holy." Eventually, "bless" became associated with "bliss," meaning merriment, happiness, and favor. Thus, "blessing" came to be used in two senses--as both a sacred gift and something that makes one happy. Gifts and gratitude are always of a piece. Blessings and thanks go together.

The Beatitudes, however, can be confusing. Few give thanks for poverty, hunger, or grief as Jesus did in his sermon. Most contemporary people have a very different idea of what makes a blessed life. *Blessed are the rich, for they own the best stuff. Blessed are the sexy and glamorous, for everyone desires them. Blessed are the powerful, for they shall control the kingdoms of the earth. Blessed are those who get everything they ever wanted; they alone will be satisfied. Blessed are the famous, for their reward is eternal life.* Money, beauty, power, achievement, and fame--we hold these things in esteem. If only we had them, or just one of them, we would be blessed. We have forgotten the meaning of the word, identifying it mostly with material things and consumer goods.

The Greek word for "blessing" ascribed to Jesus in the Beatitudes is *makarios*, which means both "happiness" and "favor." A few Bible translations actually replace "blessed" with "happy," reading "Happy are the poor" and "Happy are the hungry." To understand blessings as mere happiness, however, often results in a strange view of blessings, it seems to say poverty or starvation is a gift, and we should be happy to have it.

The alternate sense, however, opens a new understanding of the relationship between blessing and gratitude. Blessing is not just happiness, but favor. In the Christian scriptures, the word specifically means God's favor, often called "grace" or "abundance." "Favored are the poor" or "Gifted are the poor" would be equally valid ways of making sense of *makarios*.

The sense of the Beatitudes is *not* "If you are poor, God will bless you" (as a sort of consolation prize) or "If you do nice things for the poor, God will bless you." Nor is it "Be happy *for* poverty." Instead, "Blessed are the poor" could be read, "God privileges the poor." If you are poor, you are favored by God. God's gifts are with you. This would have shocked Jesus's hearers on that day long ago. Blessing was beyond the reach of everyday people. "The blessed" in Greek actually became interchangeable with "the gods" and "the elite" and meant something like "those worthy of honor." Thus, the "the blessed" were the big shots of the ancient world, the upper crust, those who lived above all the worries of normal existence. The poor, "the losers," had to live with shame. Even back then, the blessed were the rich, not the poor.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he overturned the politics of blessing. He preached that blessings were more than happiness. They were a social vision. God gives gifts to everyone, but especially to the vulnerable and those at the bottom of society. Gifts are not only for the few, but wildly distributed for all. And the people at the bottom? The losers? God's favor resides with them. God has uniquely blessed them.

What is the proper response to gifts? Gratitude. Blessing is an invitation to give thanks.

We also get something else wrong about blessing. We tend to think of it as directed to individuals. In this amazing sermon about blessings, however, Jesus addressed a crowd. Of his nine blessings, seven are plural--"they" and "theirs"--and only two are singular. Jesus was more

concerned about a blessed community than blessing people one by one. This is not about my blessings, but about *ours*.

### **Haunted by Rome**

Communities are not just random groupings. They are the purposeful forms that organize human life and work. We structure community around ideas of power, protection, productions, and obligation, often linking those things with cosmology and religion. Gratitude is not, therefore, a free-floating emotion or ethic. It exists within these communal structures, and our experience of gratitude is profoundly influenced by social and political arrangements.

Although we have not seen it clearly, we are now living through a renewed conflict over gratitude and politics. The question is surprisingly start: Will gratitude be used to undergird hierarchies of power and quid pro quo that benefit the few, or will gratefulness undo unjust practices of control to enlarge the circle of benefits for all?

### **Women Take on Gratitude**

#### **Gratitude and the Power Play**

- Gratitude as punitive
- Gratitude as privilege

*She didn't have a choice because I gave.* That is the definition of transactional gratitude.

Benefactors give in order to receive something in return: obedience, loyalty, or payback. This aspect of the gratitude system is about maintaining status and privilege. Gifts are about what you get in return. Beneficiaries are always in thrall to benefactors. You can either be a subject of the system, or you can control it.

#### **A Different Way**

The way out of the dilemma is a different sort of gratitude, one found in humility and forgiveness (that place all people on equal footing).

Women often point the way toward that kind of grateful society. We women often find ourselves at the receiving end of corrupted forms of gratitude. So, we have learned how to come up with alternatives and create a different kind of blessed community. Pink hats and all.