

Duty and delight

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue



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A source of constant irritation to my parents was my persistent procrastination when it came to saying “thank you” as a boy. The occasion was usually a birthday card from my grandmother. When I ripped it open and looked for the money that was usually there, my response was more one of excited greed than gratitude.

“Have you called and thanked her yet?” I was asked. “No, not yet, but I will.” This went on for days. “Thanked her yet?” “No, but I will, I promise.” Finally my parents would escort me to the telephone and listen as I called my grandmother and told her how grateful I was for the five dollar bill. In time, the feeling of gratitude caught up with the practice of it—in fact, I’ve always thought that perhaps it’s the habit of gratitude that generates the feeling.

I cherish Thanksgiving because it is the cultural institutionalization of the practice of gratitude. Happily, there are no Thanksgiving gifts and few greeting cards, and usually only a festive, traditional meal. Mostly it remains a quiet day to remind us of simple but important truths: the goodness of the earth, the delight of good food, the gift of family and friends, and the essential human practice of gratitude.

The heart of the faith and practice of Israel is praising and thanking. The Psalter is full of exuberant praise and thanksgiving for the creation and the Creator. So central is it to the community’s faith that nature itself is described as joining the hymn of praise and thanksgiving: the sea roars, the floods clap their hands, the fields exult and the trees of the forest sing for joy. One of Israel’s best ideas is that creation is

good—fallen, yes, but fundamentally good—and that its obvious abundance is a sign of God’s abundant goodness. The people of Israel understood that when one looked at creation, one saw something of the Creator.

Biblical faith begins with an awareness of the essential goodness of creation and moves immediately to stewardship and care for the earth. The dominion role assigned to human beings in reality means responsibility. So the flip side of the practice of gratitude is the practice of loving responsibility, and on that score we haven’t done so well.

For decades we’ve polluted, cluttered, depleted and poisoned the earth, water and air. Many people continue to dismiss or ignore what the overwhelming majority of scientists know as fact: human beings are contributing to an environmental crisis. We’ve had the hottest summer on record, destructive forest fires and one of the worst droughts in history. Yet the environment has scarcely been mentioned in the current presidential campaign. We are responsible, as stewards, for bringing these issues into the public eye.

Even as we do, we will find that praise and gratitude are central to our efforts to speak the truth. As Walter Brueggemann has written, “Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community.”

C. S. Lewis observed that grateful people are emotionally healthy people. “Praise,” he said, “almost seems to be inner health made audible.” And John Updike believed that when we cultivate and practice the habit of gratitude, the experience of gratitude deepens over the years:

Aging calls us outdoors . . . into the lowly simplicities that we thought we had outgrown as children. We come again to love the plain world, stones and wood, air and water. . . . The act of seeing itself is glorious, and of hearing, and feeling, and tasting.

No wonder we greet the season of Thanksgiving with “Now thank we all our God / With heart and hand and voices.”