

Gratitude rush

Greeting people on Sunday mornings, I'm fueled by thankfulness for their presence.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue



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My wife claims I live on adrenaline. That's her word for describing my pace on deadline-crazed days. She also thinks adrenaline is the prime accelerant in my larger excitement for life. Most people feel an adrenaline rush when in the presence of a real or perceived threat. My surges of adrenaline seem most acute when I'm feeling joy and happiness.

I don't know the science of it all, but my adrenaline pump appears to ratchet up on weekends. On Sundays, I'm feverishly retrieving names from memory and busily sorting through stories, ailments, and exhilarations of the different people I meet. I try to be in the right place at the right time with the right spirit. Doing that hundreds of times a weekend is mentally exhausting. But it's a thrill.

Greeting people before and after worship is a love of mine. Those brief exchanges may be my only engagement with certain individuals for weeks on end. It's precious time. Sometimes I speak soft words of gratitude. "Thanks for being a part of the day," I may say. "It's really great to see you!"

A critic could ask why I, as pastor, would be thanking people for coming to worship. Worship is a voluntary experience, last I checked. Participants come because they want to, not because they're doing the pastor some favor. If I believed they were coming for my sake, it would suggest a weird understanding of ministry and a warped sense of personal identity.

So why the gratitude? Well, these people are part of the deep joy of the day. Their presence affects me personally. Even if they're passing through as guests who may never return, we still get to feel the bonds of affection. Their eyes are honest. Their hearts are warm. They've sung and prayed. They've deliberately hit the pause button on life, stopping to honor God. Had they not shown up, our whole congregational experience would have been different. Deficient. Less whole. On this day, they lent a particular shape to the community, which will never again replicate itself in identical fashion. For that, I'm grateful.

In the New Testament, the word *charis* may be translated as *thanks* or *grace*. In effect, *charis* can define an act of either giving or receiving. When I say thanks to a worshiper, I don't utter it because I think I'm returning something that is owed. There's no ledger involved. The transaction is more about blessing than indebtedness. I feel lucky to be in the presence of that guest.

A host who throws a dinner party may thank everybody for coming. But her thank you is rarely connected with a sense of obligation to guests who happened to bring an appetizer or wine. Gratitude simply wells up in her heart because she's moved that her friends brought such happiness and love together.

One of my mentors, Lewis Smedes, said that "gratitude is one of the finest feelings in life . . . nothing beats gratitude for sheer joy; it is, perhaps, the genesis of all other really good feelings in the human repertoire." Anybody who ever got to witness Lew preaching or teaching saw what joy and gratitude did to him. They sent his adrenaline rushing.

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