

Gratitude, need, and desire

These three stances toward God are the beginning of faith.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue



Artwork by Alex Tsuper. (Leks052 / iStock / Getty)

Jean called with concern to let me know that her 49-year-old son was on a ventilator and not doing well. “He likes to party, as you know. He couldn’t resist hosting a Labor Day bash with friends. A bunch of them came down with COVID, but none in the rough shape he’s in.” That was the first part of the call. She then began to cry gently as she turned to reflect on all three of her kids. “Pastor, I don’t know what we did wrong. None of our kids have any interest in faith or the church. They have no idea what it could mean in a time like this or how it would help ground their lives. I don’t know what to do to help them.” I didn’t record the phone call, but I know the drift of what I said. It’s a conversation I’ve had hundreds of times before.

First, it seems to me that understanding our lives as a daily gift is a huge part of discovering faith. This is different from appreciating life for its pleasures and joys or

even reckoning with its pains and sorrows. To view life as a daily gift means there's a giver behind that gift; otherwise gift is the wrong word to use. When someone gives a gift, especially one that exceeds all deserving, the most appropriate response is gratitude. What may not be apparent to people inclined to dismiss faith is that genuine gratitude always has particularity. Being thankful in general is like being married in general. It makes no sense in the abstract. Someone has gifted you with today, I like to say, and that someone is not you.

Second, for many people who dance around the edges of faith, I often sense they spend more energy trying to please God or be good for God than acknowledging their need for God. "We can't find God unless we know we need God," Thomas Merton writes. "How blest are those who know their need for God," says Jesus in some translations of Matthew's Beatitudes (5:3). God is a blessing, not a crutch. It's easy in a world of material comfort to confuse what we truly need with what we want and can so readily acquire.

Finally, I'm more convinced than ever that a desire for God is the beginning of faith. We think a relationship with God is everything, but I wonder if the desire for that relationship isn't as sweet as the relationship itself. As I think back on my own experiences of falling in love, the desire was as beautiful as the relationship itself. "My soul thirsts for you, O God," the psalmist says. Deep into his ministry, Paul says something similar: "I want to know Christ" (not "I already know Christ"). Instead of defining ourselves by what we have or know or do, maybe we ought to think about what we most desire. The essence of a relationship with God is desiring God.

I don't know if I can create desire in other people. But the longer I'm in ministry, the more convinced I am that instilling commitment in others is not my job. My job is to help stir up and notice longings for a life in Christ. As I said to Jean at the close of our call (in a paraphrase of Meister Eckhart), "if your kids can't feel this longing, all you can do is 'long for the longing' in them."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Where faith begins."