

# On Gratitude

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**Genesis 1:26-28; 2:8,9,15**  
 (18 minutes)

Theme: *"The gratitude that motivated God to create the universe  
 is the foundation of our capacity for relationships and productiveness"*

**Creation.** "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Magnificent words to open the Book of God! "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The opening words of a book typically set the scene for everything that follows – they define what is important in that book – they set the tone of the book – they introduce the central theme of the book. These particular words are so important that the Apostle John echoes them centuries later: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). These words proclaim that everything begins with God. God is the point of departure for everything in history and in our lives.

Do you believe that God created the universe? We may have different ideas about exactly *how* this took place. But underneath those different ideas, do you fundamentally believe that God was the one who made it all happen? Scripture presents this to us as a fundamental belief – that the existence of the universe began with and continues to depend on God. John emphasizes this when he says that "through him [that is through Jesus] all things were made" (John 1:3a). We have just affirmed this in the Creed: "We believe in one God, ...maker of heaven and earth, of all that is – seen and unseen" (APB: 108).

Genesis 1 presents to us God, who by his very words, creates the universe. It is as if his words are concentrated energy that radiate out of his mouth and coalesce to form the very matter from which everything came to be. There is nothing in the world that was not either created by God or made from the energy and matter that God created.

Think, for example, of the things that are most precious to you. Things that important to you, that you treasure deeply. Perhaps they are possessions, like owning your own house or a family heirloom that has been handed down to you. Or perhaps they are important relationships. Or perhaps they more abstract, like your intelligence or independence. Or faith in God. Whatever it is that you treasure, it was made by God.

We sometimes try to distinguish between what is natural (meaning what God made) and what is man-made. But really, we do not 'make' anything. Humanity does not have the capacity to create. What we do is to 'shape'. We shape or give new form to the materials and the energy that God created a long time ago.

And so in the Eucharist we say, "Everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you" (APB:116). "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

**God's Gratitude.** But do you sometimes wonder why God created the heavens and the earth? He surely knew all the troubles he would have with humanity. So why did he create the world? Often we focus on ourselves in creation – we have a human-centred view on creation, a sense of "What's in this for us?" But let's shift the focus to God. Why did God create everything? What's in it for him? What motivated God to create?

Theologians have debated this for centuries and Scripture is not very revealing about it. So any thoughts we have on it are speculative and tentative. But let us consider the possibility that God created the heavens and the earth because he was grateful. That he created out of an experience of gratitude.

Now we often think that gratitude means being grateful to someone else for something they have given to us. And so the idea of God being grateful seems somehow heretical. Who would God be grateful to? But if you reflect back on the things are precious to you, things that you are grateful for, you will find that the experience of gratitude is not inevitably focused on the person from whom you received those things, but on the things themselves. There is something intrinsic in precious things that evokes a feeling of gratitude. So gratitude is an experience of being thankful for what we have, not necessarily being thankful to someone for what they have given to or meant to us.

Gratitude is an experience of joy, a welling up in our hearts of a feeling of happiness and contentment, that spills over, out of ourselves and into the world around us. It is a like a shimmering yellow light, infused with sparks of exuberance, that cannot be contained, but that leaps out and flows around about us, and seeks to connect with others. Gratitude and joy are sisters – you cannot have one without the other. And gratitude and joy are not treasures that we can bury inside ourselves – they are irrepressible and unrestrained. They seek out others. They desire, demand to be shared.

So, is it possible that God experienced a sense of gratitude like this for things that were precious to him? That he experienced a joyous gratitude that needed to be expressed and shared? That he created the universe as an expression of gratitude? That the universe is an incarnation of grateful joy? That he created in order to share his gratitude with someone? So that others could share in it?

When we see things that are exquisitely beautiful, like something in nature, don't we experience a feeling of joy and gratitude, a sense of privilege that we can witness it, and wish that those who are important to us could also see them? Or when we hear beautiful music, an opera by Mozart or one of Beethoven's symphonies, don't we experience a sense of awe and gratitude, that something so beautiful has been composed, and don't we wish that others would also appreciate it? Or if we have experienced or witnessed the birth of a child, didn't we feel a joy and gratitude at the miracle of birth that was so powerful that we thought we would burst if we didn't share it with others?

Perhaps God also experienced gratitude so keenly, that he had to give expression to it, had to share it with someone. And perhaps that is why he created the heavens and the earth. And perhaps that is what he meant when he looked at what he had created and saw that it was good. It was good because it was a genuine reflection of his experience of gratitude. God created because he was grateful.

**Grateful For What.** Our reading from Genesis suggests two things that God was grateful for and that God desired to share with us. Firstly, he was grateful for the experience of relationship. And secondly, he was grateful for the opportunity to be productive. These two things – relationships and productiveness – are experiences that God had that were precious to him and that he gives to humanity, right in the beginning, as gifts. Gifts to be shared with humanity because God was grateful for his own experience of them.

Firstly, we learn about relationships. In Genesis 1, we hear God having a conversation with himself about creating humanity: "Let us make humanity in our image, in our likeness" he says (Gen 1:26). And then we read, "God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). We don't know for sure who God was speaking to – some say he was speaking to himself (a kind of royal 'we'), others say he was speaking to angels or the heavenly hosts. But it is most likely that he was speaking to the other persons of the Trinity.

God has always existed, and God has always existed as a Trinity – three in one. So, God has never been alone. He was not lonely. He had company, perfect company between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And this company was profoundly satisfying to God. He experienced harmony and fulfillment in this relationship. He experienced joy and gratitude because of this relationship. And this gratitude for the experience of relationship was irrepressible and sooner or later God needed to share it with others – that is the nature of gratitude – it demands to be shared.

So God created humanity. Now listen carefully. God does not create just a man. He does not even create a man and then a woman. Rather, he creates humanity – male and female he created them. We often think of God reaching down from his cloud and creating Adam (I demonstrate to evoke the image in Michelangelo's painting). But really, Genesis 1 tells us that God created 'people in relationship'. In a sense, we can say that God created a community, rather than just a man.

So, when we experience relationships with others, whether those relationships are particularly good or rather poor, we are experiencing something that is deeply precious to God, something that gives him great joy and gratitude, and something that he shared with us in response to his gratitude. And as we enjoy relationships, as we promote healthy relationships, we draw closer to God, we experience a taste of the Trinity, we reclaim a bit of the image of God that got damaged when humanity sinned. Out of gratitude for his own experience of relationships, God blesses us with relationships.

The second thing that God was grateful for and wanted to share with us was the experience of being productive, of working, of creating. Those first words of scripture introduce this notion to us – "In the beginning, God created". It is the third word of the Hebrew Bible. We are given a time – in the beginning, an actor – God, and an action – created. We all have different conceptions of God – God as father, God as mother, God as healer, God as friend, and so on. But the most fundamental conception of God, the earliest picture of God, is God as creator.

I think that God experienced tremendous satisfaction from the experience of creating the universe. At each step in the creation process, we hear God stepping back and reviewing his handiwork, and observing and concluding that it was good. It evokes an image of God wiping his brow after intensive creativity and effort, smiling, and settling back in a chair with a deep sense of achievement and contentment and fulfilment. With a sense of gratitude. And since it is the nature of gratitude to be shared, God desired to share this experience with humanity.

What are the first things we hear God saying to the humans he had just created? "Be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen 1:28). God's first instruction to humanity is to procreate! It almost feels as if God just blurts it out in his excitement over wanting to share this experience with us. He has just finished an intensive process of creation and his immediate wish is to bless us with a similar experience of being procreative. He had just created humanity and he blesses us with the invitation to make more humans.

And then in Genesis 2 we read that God placed those first humans in the Garden of Eden and charged them "to work and take care of" the garden (Gen 2:15). This call to "work and take care of" is in the same order as God's call to "be fruitful and multiply". It is a call to be productive. The concepts of productivity, procreation, working, caring, raising and multiplying are all related. They are all facets of being creative. God experienced gratitude from his work to create the world. And he desired humanity to share that experience. And so he blesses us with the capacity and the mandate to work, to produce, to tend and care.

So whenever we produce or work we are imitating God. When we extend and exert ourselves to be productive and creative, we are sharing in an experience that gave God deep satisfaction and joy. We dare not take work for granted. Rather we should recognise that it is an awesome gift. It is an opportunity to participate in creation, to participate in making something good. Working and being productive are blessings given to humanity at the dawn of time.

**Conclusion.** So we enter this month of stewardship reflecting with gratitude on what God has given to us.

- ❖ He has given us everything that is – the heavens and the earth, the seen and the unseen.
- ❖ He has blessed us with relationships – and the capacity that we have to live in relationship with each other is a reflection of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- ❖ He has blessed us with creativity – and when we produce, when we exert ourselves and work, we are participating with God in the creation of the world.

Since the universe is an expression of God's gratitude, since it is an incarnation of gratitude, let us, also, live a life that is filled with gratitude. Let us allow God's own irrepressible gratitude and joy to fill our lives. Let us recognise the blessings that we have, even in the midst of challenges. Let us look at even the daily grind of our lives through the lens of gratitude. And let us allow our own gratitude to leap up out of us and flow into the world around.