

“Open Our Eyes and See!”

A Sermon for Thanksgiving Shabbat 5766

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Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

I.

Many years ago, when Rudyard Kipling was one of the most popular writers of the day, as a matter of fact, he received 10 schillings for every word he wrote.

So, the story goes that some students at Oxford University sent Kipling 10 schillings with the humorous request that he send them back one of his very best words. He wrote back a letter bearing a single word: "Thanks."

Think about that – "Thanks" has to be one of the best words in any language, because it's worth so much – both to the person who speaks it and to the one who hears it. A thankless person has been cut off from one of life's great joys.

Perhaps you saw that old Jules Feiffer cartoon? It showed a woman who was unhappy and dissatisfied with her life. All she could say was, "I want! I want!" And then, a very rich man entered the scene and showered her with a huge bag of jewels and expensive baubles. Amazed and stupefied, she stood at the center of the glittering accumulation of precious things and asked herself pensively, "I've got? I've got?"

And then, jumping upon the heap of expensive objects to smash them, she screams even more bitterly, "I don't like it! I don't like it!"

Now that, my friends, is ingratitude. It's like a mirror showing us nothing but ourselves. Instinctively, we seem to know deep down that the ungrateful heart closes the channel whereby our blessings can flood into life.

Gratitude, on the other hand, is like a window opening out to a garden – one whose fragrance and beauty elevate life, even when things go wrong. Haven't we learned this lesson of late?

I had to chuckle when I read in a magazine how a storekeeper was consoled by his friends after a fire destroyed his entire business. One friend asked, "Did you lose much?"

The storekeeper replied, "Well, it could have been worse – I had just marked everything down 20 percent!"

Sometimes in our self-pity, we become so sure that our burdens are the greatest, most miserable afflictions a person could have to endure. And then, much to our surprise, we are jolted into a greater awareness that maybe – just maybe – our lot isn't quite so bad after all.

A minister once said it so well in this little poem:

Today, upon a bus I saw a girl with golden hair,
I envied her and wished
that I was half so fair.
I watched her as she rose to leave,
and saw her hobble down the aisle,

She had one leg and wore a crutch
 but as she passed – a smile.
 Oh, God, forgive me when I whine;
 I have two legs and the world is mine.
 Two legs to take me where I go,
 Two eyes to see the sunset's glow,
 Two ears to hear all I should know,
 Oh, God, forgive me when I whine.
 I'm blessed indeed, the world is mine.

A traditional Jew prays three times a day – Shacharit, Mincha, and Ma-ariv.
 Between those services and prayers recited upon awakening and eating – there are over
 100 times every weekday for saying Baruch atah Adonai.

It may be well that one of our greatest problems today is that so many of us seem
 to be unable to distinguish our legitimate needs from our greed. Most likely, the poorest
 person in the world is the one who always wants more than he already has – one who
 can't rest until he has it all!

This post-Katrina Thanksgiving is the perfect time to acknowledge our blessings
 and to admit that what and how much we have is nowhere near as important as what we
 do with it. No life is ultimately made successful by the sheer mass of its accumulated
 “stuff.” Owning the most does not lead one to humility and gratitude, to success and
 character.

Breathes there a man with soul so dead
 Who never to himself hath said,
 “Lord, I thank you!”

II.

But, saying “thanks” is just not enough! We develop our sense of gratitude best
 when we express our thanks through concrete and real service to others.

In one of his letters, the English Romantic poet John Keats wrote:

I feel more and more everyday,
 as my imagination strengthens,
 that I do not live in this world
 alone, but in a thousand worlds.

Haven't we learned that from Katrina and Rita, the television and newspapers –
 even a drive across town?

And, precisely that awareness, to a lesser degree, is what must come to us. We
 need to see! We live not only in our own little worlds, but also in many worlds. In fact,
 the whole purpose of religion is to open our eyes to embrace other lives in sympathy and

in service— our families, our city, our neighbors, our region, and the life of humanity. And yet, somehow, the time is never quite right for us to do for others what we know must be done. What conditions must we experience before we are moved to get up and help another soul?

When the artist Donatello refused to accept a block of marble from a quarry in Florence because it contained imperfections, Michelangelo took that rejected stone and carefully carved his famous statue of David.

You see, opportunities to do the good rarely come with guarantees or without risks and inconvenience. To express gratitude for our blessings, we must seize upon the raw materials of existence. Although we may not be wealthy and powerful, there is so much you and I can do to help others. Our Social Justice Committee is lined up to work at Second Harvest and to serve lunch on Christmas Day. There's no need to wait for the state and national government to do it, nor should we wring our hands in helpless dismay while others continue to suffer.

Thanksgiving is a holiday on which to offer our prayers of gratitude, and to resolve to do our part, whatever we are able to do, to keep others from “falling” – to help ease the unemployment, homelessness, the hopelessness, the hunger, and pain currently that plagues our New Orleans. Hillel made the point so many centuries ago – inviting us to open our eyes and see our situation in life and in God's eyes:

If I am not for myself, who will be?
But if I am for myself alone,
What am I?
And if not now, when?

Amen