

## “CULTIVATIONS”

A Parish Newsletter Series, February—November 2011

### One: JOY AND GRATITUDE

The cultivation of joy and gratitude is a key discipline in a life of faith. If we’re not careful, we can start to see unhappiness as somehow inherently more “real.”

So, how *do* we cultivate joy and gratitude? What is graciousness, and how do we get more of it in our lives? These are questions which are close to the Spirit’s action, to be sure. Step one is asking them of ourselves. We can’t find what we seek in them merely by wondering why others can’t be nicer or better; why our exterior life circumstances can’t be less challenging.

After all, joy, gratitude, and graciousness are interior dispositions. They are, however, dispositions that need to be mindfully cultivated. They don’t “just happen.” They aren’t the simple property of those lucky enough to have naturally less irritable temperaments. For all of us, they involve real spiritual *work*—work that often requires reformation of our habitual reactivities.

But it doesn’t start with *our* work, of course. Because it’s a matter of grace, it starts with what *God* does, in Christ. And from start to finish, we’re completely dependent on God’s power, not our own. However, this by no means makes us passive—mere customers or consumers.

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12b-13)

Paul here addresses this very dynamic. In the topic at hand (and, really, all topics that we could ever have at hand), we begin with prayer. And our prayer life, itself, needs to be cultivated, with real spiritual discipline and commitment. So we ask God—repeatedly and persistently—for a more grateful, joyous disposition.

Above all, we don’t get caught up in running after the feelings. Feelings come and go—and frequently are in conflict with one another at the same time. We ask God; keep asking God—and *then behave as if we really were joyous, grateful, gracious*. Feelings often follow action.

First, in obedience to Christ, we act lovingly, kindly—whatever it might be. Then later, after the fact, without our having noticed it at the time, we may be surprised to realize that we have come to feel differently.

We also need to step outside the cycle of our own negative reactivities. Right when we notice that we are being ungrateful; right when we start to assume bad things about others; right when our anxieties come rushing at us—we stop! We stop, breathe, pray. Quietly setting the old, tired script down. Then walking with Christ every step of the way we pass out of the cycle—to the new, as yet unknown place—the place to which Christ is leading us. Maybe because it is unknown we will feel a little scared. It will be O.K., though, because Christ is with us.

We repeat the process as often as necessary (and it will be often). We need to be patient, though—both with the Lord and ourselves. Bad habits tend to kick in again so easily. It takes a while for better things to become new patterns for us. We'll mess up from time to time, to be sure. God can handle it. We'll just start up again—and keep going, again, by God's Grace. And, we remember. From first to last, it *is* Grace.

God keeps faith. The journey may be long (as long is measured now). But the time will come when we will both know and even feel the truth of the Lord's saying, "See, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

Then we'll come to know that all our cultivated gratitude was the only way we could begin to perceive the reality that really is real.

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Two: PATIENCE, KINDNESS, AND GENTLENESS

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Patience, kindness, gentleness.

They often seem in such short supply, these days; not only in our civic, cultural, and global discourses—but also in our personal relationships: how we characteristically deal with one another in situations of disappointment or disagreement. It’s so easy to slip into assuming bad things about one another; falling into habitual dismissiveness. What’s often lacking is imagination: The capacity of supposing—just supposing!—that the difficult “others” may have good (or at least understandable) reasons for doing what they do. Maybe—just maybe!—they are perceiving some bit of insight that we don’t “get” (or don’t want to “get”). Perhaps that “other” isn’t simply wrong, evil, or lacking.

As I’ve shared before (and try to keep in mind for myself, as well):

“An apt first application of ‘the hermeneutic of suspicion’ is to our own selves.” (*From the East Gate*, “A Lesson from Keats”)

Where do we go from here? How do we get to the “there” indicated by the Spirit?

A good first step may be clearing up a potential misunderstanding. We’re not supposed to be pushovers or doormats: naïve, insipid folk—incapable of ever making a stand, naming real evil for what it is, making a difficult decision, or defending what needs to be defended.

What we’re talking about here is having “patience, kindness, and gentleness” (and humility) become—more deeply, more fully, more broadly—our characteristic life posture. *Most importantly, we’re speaking of the acquisition of new habits in Christ.* Not instant, all-or-nothing moral perfectionism on our own.

For the Spirit isn't just "there," at the end. The Spirit is also *here*, with us, in the struggle—and will be, all the way, in the long process. And, as always, with the Spirit, we're in it *together*. More than we ever knew, suspected—or admitted.

So, what are we to do at crunch-times, when the old reactivities start to kick in?

Once again—as always—stop. Just for a bit. Stop, breathe, pause the cycle—and ask the Giver of all Good for help. Oftentimes, right here, a brief centering prayer can be of great help. This may take many forms. Perhaps a few breathings of the Jesus Prayer. Maybe the silent recitation of a special scripture verse. The particular cultivation of some such form is a spiritual discipline can bear much fruit. Our regular practice will make the form readily available at the difficult moments (which frequently, especially at first, catch us by surprise).

And if this seems like drudgery, we remember that it's the way to freedom. Always having to be in control, always having to have things 100% figured out—that's the tyranny! The old alienating patterns were the real captivity.

Jesus has something better in mind for us. Thanks be. In all things, this Lent, always; may we be more transparent to His Light.

I'll close, for now, with a bit more again from Galatians. (And remember, here, before I do so, that for Paul, the word "flesh" does *not* mean the physical, material, the bodily. For Paul, "flesh" means the totality of our life as we now find it: "as is," so to speak—on its own and on our own.)

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:1, 22-25)

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Three: EARTHEN VESSELS

On Ash Wednesday we were invited to a season of “self-examination”—to remember “the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.” (*Book of Common Prayer*, page 265)

On-going growth and development are part of the deal for us. Mere appeals to our *status quo* won't do. The Spirit is at work with us with a great endeavor; working “until all of us come...to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11,13). Nothing less. So, we have no business ruling out change just because it's profound. We are meant to learn from one other—and thereby grow. The Spirit challenges as well as comforts.

But there's also a balance here—one of those exquisitely delicate balances of faith. It is also written, “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7)

“Clay jars.” The King James Bible translates the phrase, “earthen vessels.” Either way, it seems to make clear that we have to be humble enough to recognize we can't expect, either from ourselves or others, infinite malleability. Neither we nor others can jump out of our skins. In this present life we *do* have enduring strengths and weaknesses, personal histories and personality styles. More than this, we and others often evaluate these very differently at different times! The very same feature—the very same characteristic—at the same time, can be evaluated by some who know us as a “plus,” and by others as a “minus.”

We could easily end up chasing ourselves in circles. So in addition to growth, we also need substantial measures of acceptance: specifically the ability to rejoice in all good gifts while bearing with shortcomings in the greater context of gratitude. A perfectionistic idealism can damage the clay jars—and actually reduce their capacity to hold and share the treasure.

And sometimes in our Lenten journeys we come to learn, by yet another gift of the Spirit, that the “bearing with” and the “giftedness” can be much more closely connected to each other than we ever previously suspected.

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Four: DISPOSITION

We’ve been reflecting on the spiritual disciplines—especially those of attitude. Many of us know the work that goes into cultivation, especially this time of year. There’s a lot of effort we put in to get our gardens to the level of natural beauty.

Now I’d like to talk about “**Disposition**,” surely one of the key words in our vocabulary of the Spirit.

Let’s start with a couple of dictionary definitions:

“The predominant or prevailing tendency of one’s spirits; mental and emotional outlook or mood; characteristic attitude,”

“The habits of mind and emotion that one displays over a length of time; the prevailing aspect of one’s mind as shown in behavior and in relationships with others.”

Those sound pretty good to me. Even simply meditating on such definitions could be helpful. (Of course, only so if the meditation is self-reflective!)

But in the context of Christian life, their significance is taken to a whole new place. Our context now is ongoing personal conversion. Having been claimed and empowered by the Spirit of Christ, we are now responsible, in fresh and deeper ways, for the development of our dispositions.

There are three aspects of this development to which I often refer:

- 1) **Positive Regard**,
- 2) **Non-aggression**, and
- 3) **Careful Listening**.

To be sure, in some important ways, each of these apply to our relationship with ourselves. However, the greater—more difficult—task is their application to our relationship to others. Jesus Christ leads us to express positive regard, non-aggression, and careful listening for *others*—and do so *graciously*. And here, specifically, “graciously” means that we share them with those who (in our estimation) have *not* earned or merited it.

By so doing we simply pass on what we have already so wonderfully been given: goodness for the undeserving.

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)

Blessings on all our cultivations, goodly and Godly—in flower plots, vegetable patches—and our own hearts. Blessings in the Risen Christ.

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Five: POSITIVE REGARD

Let’s focus now on **“Positive Regard.”**

We’re not speaking here of a simple by-product of those lucky few with such naturally sunny personalities and such remarkably congenial circumstances that they just can’t help being chipper. The Way of Positive Regard, rather, is an approach to one another that we cultivate, precisely, in the context of difficult or disappointing circumstances. After all, we can always find reasons to hunker down in negative regard that can seem “safe,” oddly enough. It’s a sort of pre-emptive strike against the world. At least we won’t be hurt again, we tell ourselves.

Positive Regard is risky. And people being what we are, we will certainly feel the effects of risky vulnerability—it’s only a matter of time. The deeper risk, however, is that without the discipline of cultivating positive regard, we will miss many blessings that might have come to us. Good things often speak in the “still small voice.” (1 Kings 19:12, *KJV*, *RSV*) We need to train ourselves to listen more keenly for them.

On the other hand, we’re seldom at much risk of not noticing the bad stuff that comes our way. That usually shouts right out at us. This is not because bad is somehow more real than good—it’s the other way around, actually. This misapprehension of ours (magnifying the bad, and minimizing—or missing—the blessings) is a feature of our present sinful condition.

As Eucharistic Prayer 1 from *Enriching Our Worship* puts it,

“We failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love.”

“Who will rescue us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”  
(Romans 7:24-25)

Thanks be, indeed. The Resurrection of Jesus initiates us into a new way of life—and a new way of looking at our present life—even here and now.

We learn to look for the good, rejoice more fully in all that is praiseworthy. Yes, we and everybody else will still be a mix. But passing Grace along means that even (especially!) in mixed circumstances, we find the way to think better of one another, by giving the benefit of the doubt, assuming good intentions, and recognizing faults in contexts of greater appreciation.

So, how do we start, and how do we make progress?

**Step One**, as always, is the Grace of God: God’s strength, not ours. Seek it, pray for it, and cherish it when it comes. It’s more than “Step One,” really. It’s the basis of every step we take throughout the whole redemptive journey.

**Step Two**, I’m convinced, is cultivating our capacity for self-criticism. This is **not** a matter of paralyzing shame. It **is** letting go of the old, tired, self-righteous script. In Jesus Christ we are freed from the constant need to defend ourselves, to even the score. We no longer need to be ruled by our need to “fix” things.

There is a wonderful—in fact, painfully insightful—line in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

“It sometimes feels very good to take offense, doesn’t it?”

Now in Christ we can bear to be honest about what was going on in all our interior stuff, with that quiet, radical openness that godly, ongoing repentance brings. We can now admit to ourselves the unhappy investments we had in habitual complaint.

In Christ we have a more perfect Defender than we could ever have imagined, though that means that we do have to accept Christ’s timing and methods.

**Step Three** is disciplined effort in cooperation with the new beginning God has given us. We oughtn’t worry too much about the fact that full reformation of our interior habits can take a long

time. We will have pauses and setbacks in the process. We just keep going, honoring the good in others, giving thanks for all we can in their lives, seeing them through the new interpretive lens. Even when it's hard to do, we welcome people with Christ's own welcome.

We need to repeat the steps. Often.

“Love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8)

What about problems that really do have to be addressed—the kind that ignoring will just make much worse? We don't need to be naïve. Sometimes there are difficulties so severe that they must be engaged. Sometimes limits do have to be named, but always with great care, with the capacity to see, self-critically, what **we** may have brought to the situation's mix.

Jesus said:

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)

One of the great fringe benefits of Positive Regard is that not infrequently we will actually find that it helps increase the good and decrease the bad. Truth is, when we put others under siege with judgment, complaint, all-or-nothing perfectionism, they usually do what we would do in their place—they freeze, shut down, or withdraw.

It is Grace (not demand) which opens up the possibilities.

Today, this week, this month—why not give it a try?

Where we have been characteristically rehearsing the failings of others (out loud or in our hearts), give appreciation a try. Remember that Christ really loves the “others” we had judged—and Christ even rejoices in their feeble, imperfect efforts to do his will. Join Christ in his love and joy.

We don't look for instant results. When we do this enough, though, we will surely be different. Do this enough, and we will find that God has made all things new.

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8)

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Six: NON-AGGRESSION

We continue with “**Non-aggression.**”

Perhaps it’s a little difficult dealing with a negative term: a “non-something.” Maybe putting it as “The Way of Peace” is better. But this means more than mere relaxation.

We are the People of the God of Peace (Romans 16:20, Hebrews 13:20). Hence, we are to be a People of Peace: a People who know and share the Peace which the Lord has given us. We are to do so in all the dimensions of our life. So, we’re talking about an active spiritual commitment.

All human beings are created in God’s “image and likeness.” (Genesis 1:27, 5:2) When we engage one another—even in difficult circumstances—it is always a sacred encounter. God is right there. So, if we consume the life of the sacred others—in exploitation or needless roughness—we are departing from who we really are in Jesus.

Of course, the Peace of God includes broad, global applications. The truth is, however, that the Spirit works from inside out. Close within, and then from there in greater concentric circles. It starts in our own souls, and then goes to work, in its first application, in our immediate circumstances. Real peace is no abstraction—no distant theory.

Needless to say, as we live into this Way, we all have some “stuff” we need to get past—bad habits to release, good ones to grow into. The human patterns to hit back, strike preemptively—or at least to make sure we have a thick layer of prickly insulation—are very strong. We’re not exempt. But deep down, we know that those old protective strategies didn’t really work so well for us, after all.

Jesus has the better thing in store for us. Yes, it’s a gift; “all of grace.” But yes, it’s also true that “practice makes perfect.” Lots of practice. So, we shouldn’t set all or nothing standards. Throwing in the towel because we’ve messed up is a bad idea. Remember that we’re not *fighting* our aggression, but stepping away from it—with Christ and to Christ.

And here are some of the essential elements of travelling with Jesus:

Prayer, meditative practice, more critique of ourselves, more benefit of the doubt for others.

Deep attentiveness to the Word, read and preached. (We listen attentively for what surprises God may have to give us.)

Mindful preparation for Holy Communion. (We're taking our Life in our hands, after all.)

Gratitude for all the evidences of our spiritual growth. (And yes, these *will* come.)

In all these, we learn to hold one another in God's own tenderness. We shouldn't worry about getting it down perfectly right away. Just living it—sharing it—more fully. Close by, and then in greater circles. Jesus said, "See, I am making all things new!" (Revelation 21:5)

The Way of Non-aggression. The Way of Peace. With Jesus, we'll get there. In fact, with Jesus, we are walking around with a bit of "there" already within us. That's the place where we always have enough of God's mercy to pass it along.

## “CULTIVATIONS,” Seven: CAREFUL LISTENING

We come, now, to **“Careful Listening.”**

Listening is one of the most important disciplines in our life of faith. Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, placed a particular emphasis on the centrality of *hearing* in our salvation: “We are made Christians not by working, but by hearing.” (*Commentary on Galatians*)

But the problem with perception is that our prior expectations tend to get in the way. This is especially so, I think, when it comes to hearing. We hear what we think we’re going to hear—all-too-often heavily filtered through our anxieties and fears. And much of our attention is already directed at planning what we might say next in response. So conversations quickly become rather like chess games. (At best, that is. Sometimes they’re more like demolition derbies.)

In such modes, we frequently don’t hear what was really said in the first place.

The discipline of spiritual listening seeks to be present—transparently present—to what is being said. This means not jumping too quickly to expectations, corrections, and evaluation. First, really be present. Then, maybe, ask questions (not leading ones). Be present some more. Breathe with it for a bit.

I’m not saying there’s no place for response. In fact, response is often required of us. The point is that we *start* with hearing—and making sure that we have done so in good faith. Healthy relationships are committed to fostering this good beginning with one another until it becomes habitual.

We can always decide later that someone got it wrong, that we have some stuff we need to add to the mix. We start by hearing.

C. S. Lewis, in one of his last books, *An Experiment in Criticism*, wrote about engaging with works of art. What he said there goes, as well, with all human communication—from our everyday

conversations all the way to reading the Holy Scriptures—and from there, ultimately, to our listening to God.

“The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)”

Without such surrender, we can only dance alone.

So, how do we foster better listening?

- 1) Through all the classic spiritual tools, of course. Prayer; meditation. Especially building into our everyday practice the habit of pausing before responding—sometimes even waiting for a better day to do so! The point is to step out of the old reactivity roundabout.
- 2) Growing in “Positive Regard” and “Non-aggression.” These two, along with “Careful Listening,” all three, support and reinforce each other.
- 3) Care in how we express ourselves. Speaking, whenever possible, in ways that open up what will follow—rather than shut down. Communicating, whenever possible, affirmingly. (Remembering our baptismal commitment to “respect the dignity of every human being.” Remembering, too, Lady Julian of Norwich’s telling description of Jesus as “our courteous Lord.”)
- 4) Patience with ourselves and others in the process. We’re not going to be getting any of this down perfectly anytime too soon.

Most importantly, we foster our better listening with God’s grace; God’s help.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

Remember: God is the very best listener of all.