The Witness of Combines

After the first of our pet cats died in 1975, our four-year-old son began to ask a series of new questions: "Will I die before I grow up to be a live person? Does God know if you be alive or don't be alive again? Who is God? What does God do?"

In the third act of Thornton Wilder's play, Our Town, a 26-year-old mother, Emily Webb Gibbs, bemoans the blindness and ignorance of people in their daily living. "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. So all that was going on and we never noticed." Then Emily says, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you." She asks the stage manager of the play, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" "No," the stage manager replies. "The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

In Number Our Days, a 75-year-old Jewish tailor gives the author, Barbara Myerhoff, his philosophy of life. "You should be good to others. You should pay attention to your history. You should always be wide awake so you can be responsible for what you do. God wants more of the Jews than to survive. The Jews must choose to be alive." "Paying attention to being alive—that's what God intends for all of us to do," said a 71-year-old woman in a class I once taught about Myerhoff's book, which highlights Jewish elders in Venice, California.

The thesis of my remarks today is that among other things, paying attention to being alive, realizing life as one lives it, growing up to be a live person, involves three things. They are living as if it were the first day of our lives, as if it were the last day of our lives, and as if it were the present day of our lives.

Paying attention to being alive means trying to live as if it were the first day of our conscious lives. The ninth chapter of John gives us the new insight of a blind beggar on the first day of a life in which he, having been touched by Jesus, is no longer blind. Immediately he was harassed by Jewish elders, who thought that the beggar was blind because he had sinned. The authorities could not understand who Jesus was. At first, the beggar had called Jesus by that name only, then he called him a prophet, and finally he called him Lord. He had progressed from the physical and the prophetic to the faith-filled level of living.

Listen to James Dickey, the poet and novelist, as he imagines what has happened in John 9. He is telling the story from the point of view of the beggar given new sight. "The delicate touch of fingertips on eyelids. I have never felt such gentleness; creativity of the world must surely be there. Here is a pool that people will lead me to. . . . I will fall forward. After the first shock of cold, I will arise and will see the faces of humankind. The trees and the red flowers will be around me. I will come out of this pool of Siloam, a man reborn among men beholding a great world in its magnificent colors. It is a vision every[one] has when [one] comes from [the] mother's womb. I am here to affirm it. . . . I can see."

What are the essentials of this first day in which the beggar is no longer blind? There is freshness, or novelty. There is wonder. There is new insight. There is worshipful trust. And

there is genuine healing.

The essential quality I want to stress in this passage is that of insightful wonder. "Now here is an astonishing thing!" the beggar says in John 9:30 in the Jerusalem Bible. "Why, this is a marvel!" the Revised Standard Version puts it. "What an extraordinary thing!" the New English Bible says. The beggar replies to the Pharisees: "Here is a man who has opened my eyes, yet you do not know where he comes from. . . . To open the eyes of a man born blind—it is unheard of since time began. If that man had not come from God, he could have done nothing." The Jewish elders remain blind and the beggar insightful.

Wonder, I submit, is a way of seeing, of knowing. It is an astonishment. It is a curiosity, a prompting to ask questions, an openness to something new. At its best, it is a miracle. And it leads to awe. Such wonder is familiar to any student of the Bible. It comes in the story of creation, in Genesis, in the words of the speaker in Psalm 8, and in the voice of the whirlwind in Job. It appears in the common reactions to Jesus's preaching, teaching, and healing: [the crowds] "were beside themselves with amazement."

Wonder is also familiar to someone who has watched a baby lamb, a kitten, or a human baby being born; to a teenager from Los Angeles who has never before seen the snowflakes on a windshield until she has come to Michigan during December; to those who walk the campus of Michigan State around the first of May and middle of October every year; and to those who celebrate 50 years of married life, aware of the warts and weaknesses as well as the warmth, wit, and wisdom of one's partner. It is also part of the freshness and insight and novelty of a new pastor arriving soon. To live as if it were the first day of consciously being alive is to live in such wonder.

Paying attention to being alive is also living as if it were the last day of our lives. Here I take my bearing from G. K. Chesterton: "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." In his autobiography he tried to define in a single sentence the most important lesson of his long and fruitful life. The critical lesson was whether you took things for granted or whether you took them with gratitude. It is easy to find examples for both responses.

Robert Hayden, a Black poet from Michigan, has captured the former in his poem, "Those Winter Sundays."

> Sundays too my father got up early
> and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.
>
> I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
> When the rooms were warm, he'd call,

and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Taking people and things for granted, indifference, and ingratitude are alive and well even in a pandemic.

Taking life with gratitude is also alive and well. It often comes at the end of life. At 44, dying of tuberculosis, Henry Thoreau received a visit from his aunt Louisa. "Have you made your peace with God?" she asked him. "I did not know that we had ever quarreled, Aunt," Thoreau replied. Before he died, my father—an Iowa farmer who said he handpicked 100 bushels of corn a day as a boy and much later drove a combine that harvested thousands of bushels a day—said to me, "We've been very, very fortunate. We have a nice family and good health. I've had a very good life. I feel awful lucky. It's not all my doing. I'm grateful for it all."

Gratitude may be a spontaneous act: "I say grace," a three-year-old child volunteers. It may be the disciplined habit of writing daily in a journal what one feels grateful for. Thankful expressions may also come with separation and the end of a relationship. In 2005, a young South Korean businessman spent a year in the United States. He traveled a lot, and he read books such as How Race is Lived in America. Every week that he was in Lansing, Jooyong Jang came to men's group meetings at our church and even to our retreat. He wanted to understand who led "the real United States," what seemed to be the American character, and what typical Americans were like. On the last day before his departure, he thanked the group for helping him satisfy his curiosities and answer his questions. Then he walked in front of us in the fellowship hall, stood erect, bent his knees to the floor, threw his hands forward, and bowed. For several seconds he held his head down in respect and reverence and gratitude.

The book of Psalms is a model of giving thanks. Psalms 100 and 111 come readily to mind. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, bless his name!" (100:4) "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation" (111:1). Gratitude is also thanks-living, or living eucharistically, for "eucharist" in Greek and Latin means "gratitude" or "thankfulness."

In his book, Being Mortal, Dr. Atul Gawande tells what happened when his daughter, Hunter, from ages 11 to 13, was taking piano lessons. She adored her 62-year-old teacher, Peg Bachelder. When Hunter struggled to learn something new, Ms. Bachelder was patient. When Hunter grasped the sound or a new technique, Peg hugged her student in delight.

Then Peg Bachelder's cancer interrupted the lessons. Hospice care, however, helped her regain some strength and her interest in resuming lessons. "She came to a clear view of how she wanted to live the rest of her days," her husband said. "She was going to be home, and she was going to teach." She lived six weeks under hospice care. Morphine, a devoted hospice nurse, and a caring doctor made a difference. "She was more alive running up to a lesson and for the days after," her husband recalled.

Her students were her children, and she wanted to say her good-byes to them and give her parting advice to them. For four weeks, Hunter Gawande had her final lessons. On another occasion, she, along with several other students, played in a final piano concert. At the end of the last recital, Peg Bachelder took "each student away from the crowd to give a personal gift and say a few words." She gave Hunter a book of music, hugged her, and told her, "You're special." Peg Bachelder gave those students her best day possible, sharing her wisdom, settling relationships, providing a legacy, telling her students that they mattered and would be okay, and making her peace with God.

Paying attention to being alive is not only living as if it were the first and last days of our lives. It is also living in the awareness that it is the present day of our life. What it means to live fully in the present is a subject in itself. Today let me finish this sermon by focusing on fidelity, or faithfulness. We need to be faithful to the ordinary moments of life so that we can bring something special to the more dramatic episodes of life. And we need to be faithful to the more dramatic moments so that we can bring something fresh to the commonplace experiences. Here I will stress some common expressions of faith-filled gratitude and one extraordinary endeavor.

In William Kent Kreuger's moving novel, Ordinary Grace, an 11-year-old boy who stutters in public offers to say grace at a reception in church after his older sister's funeral. "Heavenly Father," he says without stuttering, "for the blessings of this food and these friends and our families, we thank you. In Jesus's name, amen." Before Basha, an 89-year-old Jewish widow in Venice, California, would sit down to eat a meal, she would spread a white linen handkerchief over her tablecloth in her tiny apartment. "This my mother taught me to do. No matter how poor, we would eat off clean white linen, and say the prayers before touching anything to the mouth. And so I do it still. Whenever I sit down, I eat with God, my mother, and all the Jews who are doing these same things even if I can't see them."

"Thank you," a college student writes to his teacher, "for helping me reach within myself and seek out my true voice. You have taught me to strive, to question, and to endure. Most of all, you have aided me in regaining my respect for my fellow man. We are all different, yet all so alike. Thank you." A teacher, 22, writes a thank you to each of her students at the end of the school year, and a college professor closes the semester by thanking every student in the course for something that each student has contributed in class discussions.

At 40, Maya Angelou wrote about Bertha Flowers, the Black aristocrat in Stamps,

Arkansas, who threw Maya her first lifeline. After Angelou had been abused as a girl, she went mute for a number of years. Then Bertha Flowers invited her to Flowers's house, read aloud a portion of Charles Dickens's novel, A Tale of Two Çities, and reminded Maya that spoken language distinguished human beings from all other creatures. "She gave me back my voice," Angelou told Bill Moyers. And what a voice it was.

Every month since the Covid-19 pandemic erupted in March, 2020, The Grapevine at our church has been filled with gratefulness: letters and cards expressing appreciation to departing pastors, staff, and other members, thank you's for physical improvements, music and youth sermons in worship services, miscellaneous volunteering, participation in CROP walk, contributions to mission projects in the U. S., Haiti, Kenya, and Niger, prayers and support for members in need of help, continuing financial commitments, even tributes to those who have died. In our society today, health care workers, essential workers elsewhere, neighbors who look out for others, beleaguered school board members, genuine public servants—all deserve our gratitude.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words, "Stories matter. Many stories matter." So too, gratitude matters. Many kinds of gratitude matter. They may be spontaneous expressions or disciplined habits, personal, interpersonal, or institutional, directed to and received by one or many, or attributed to God. Here finally is an extraordinary episode of thankful faithfulness.

"When Kent Meyers was sixteen, his father died of a stroke. There was corn to plant, cattle to feed, and a farm to maintain." Twenty-six years later, Meyers published his book, The Witness of Combines. The premature death of Wayne Meyers at 56 forced the widow, Marguerite, and the nine children to run the farm until the crops could be harvested, the cattle sold, and the farm auctioned off. Family members used their talents, worked hard, and took quiet delight in their competence. During the summer, the women would usually can 120 quarts of tomatoes, 50 quarts of string beans, 80 quarts of sweet corn, 30 quarts of sauerkraut, 50 quarts of pickles, and 70 quarts of applesauce. The sons became competent judges of what cattle to sell, when, and how to empty the haymow, the silo, and the corncribs. Loving Catholic parents, Kent Meyers now sees, showed him that the world invited him into relationship, into responsibility for pain and joy, and into the ambiguity of gentleness and cruelty.

The title essay lovingly brings together all five themes in the book—land, family, work, community, and eternity. The central image is simple: several combines and trucks coming down the road to the Meyers's farm in the fall to harvest the corn. The neighbors quietly did in two days what would have taken the Meyers boys two weeks to do—"a healing gesture from the human, communal heart." And the neighbors soon learned that those boys—without their father—had produced a crop that yielded more bushels per acre than most of the neighbors' farms did.

Here combines are more than heavy machines that pick the corn, strip the kernels from husks and cobs, and transfer the corn from hoppers to the trucks or wagons beside the

machines. Combines are a symbol of thanks-living. The witness of combines is a fidelity to what the father had taught his children. It is a faithful rite of passage by a 16-year-old "into the community of human beings" and "the community of the land itself." It is a witness to the acceptance and affirmation of flawed, imperfect, different human beings brought together by necessity. And it is a kind of faith-filled kairos, or ripening—of harvest, time, community, words, ritual, and land in harmony—"our communion with all things and each other, of our living and dying and being."

If gratitude is ultimately the gift and grace of God, then community and communion answer loss. People can be "graced by loss." The Witness of Combines captures the wonder and mystery of that affirmation.

Let us, then, pay attention to being alive. Let us live with the wonder of the first day, the gratitude of the last day, and the fidelity to the ordinary and dramatic of the present day.

PRAISE AND GLORY AND WISDOM AND THANKSGIVING AND HONOR AND POWER AND STRENGTH TO OUR GOD FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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