

**Sermon Preached by Rabbi Aaron Bisno
Rabbi-in-Residence at Calvary Episcopal Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the First Sunday after Christmas Day, Year B
December 31, 2023**

It has been said that there are really only three prayers: wow, please, and thank you. The first is self-explanatory. We see something amazing. We are surprised or caught unaware, and we do know other than to express sheer utter wonder. At a birth, perhaps, a beautiful sunset, upon hearing a remarkable tale of escaping misfortune, we are overcome and can do no other than to marvel. Wow. We may even in that moment find ourselves rendered mute, dumbfounded, overcome. We whisper, wow. The second type of prayer, captured in the word please, is also an all-too-human and natural response. We want or we need something. We feel without and cry out for help, help bridging the distance between what is and what we wish were ours, between what we have and what we would like for it to be true.

Please, we plead, let things be different. Give me more of that or the other. Please, do me this one solid. Please, please, also a very common and human response and prayer. But if an expression of wonder and want come easily to our lips, the third type of prayer, thank you, or gratitude is perhaps less natural, or at least may require that we reorient our thinking just a bit, that we recognize what is right before us and at hand.

Consider the following story. Downtown in a city just outside a major office building, a woman has a small cart from which she sells pretzels. The pretzels are marked at 50 cents apiece. And every morning as he comes to work, a certain man before entering the building passes by her cart, nods, places two quarters before her, smiles, and walks on.

He never takes a pretzel, just drops his 50 cents with her, nods, and smiles, and enters the building. This happens every morning. She sets up shop and places her pretzels at the window. The man comes by and nods and smiles and deposits 50 cents and then walks on. For years it's like this. 50 cents, no pretzel, just a smile. And then one day he approaches as he always does and nods and smiles and places two quarters atop her shelf. He turns to go and yet this time she calls after him, hey, wait, they've gone up to 75 cents.

Why is it that our all too human propensity is to see what we lack, to focus on what we are missing rather than what we have? Why is the prayer of gratitude so often difficult for us to express? Our reading from Isaiah this morning speaks of the wonders of the world. It tells us of God's gifts to us and what our reaction ought be. Listen once more to the prophet's words. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My whole being shall exalt in my God. For God has clothed me with garments of salvation. God has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown to spring up, so does God cause righteousness and praise to come forth from our lives.

To this, the late Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, between 1991 and 2013, Chief Rabbi Sacks taught that the gratitude, that gratitude is not just a personal virtue, but rather that gratitude is itself the cornerstone of religious consciousness. And he went on to explain, the ability to express gratitude not only distinguishes human beings from the lower primates, but it is this ability, the ability we have to look around, to look at what we have, and to be grateful. It is this ability alone, which has the power to transform both the lives of individuals and the lived experience of entire communities. So why then is the song of gratitude, why then is a prayer of appreciation so difficult? If it is so inherently a part of our religious and

spiritual experience? In the words of the 26th President Teddy Roosevelt, it is because comparison is the thief of joy. Beautiful, simple and true, comparison is the thief of joy. The ancient rabbis of the Talmudic period also said much the same thing when they asked, who is happy, and responded to their own query, the one who is content with what they have. That is the definition of one who is happy.

He says, another contemporary rabbi, Rabbi Sharon Broust from Los Angeles, who was profiled last week in the Wall Street Journal, she says, I know it is a human instinct to key in on what is missing, often at the expense of what is present right before us. I know it is a human instinct to key in on what is missing, often at the expense of recognizing what is right before us, but I know in my heart, she continues. And I want you to know in yours that we have so much for which to be grateful, and we are not as alone as we imagine. The verse is we shared earlier from Isaiah, the ones that spoke of God's gifts to us, garments of salvation and robes of righteousness, and of the earth as a garden that provides for our needs and is deserving of praise. These verses are immediately preceded by a verse at the beginning of chapter 61 that speaks of the year of the Lord's favor. Now, this verse is traditionally understood as referencing a time of divine blessing, of redemption, of renewal. And it seems an apt and appropriate reminder to us as we prepare, gathered as we do on the morning of December 31st, as we prepare for the promises inherent in a new year.

For Isaiah 61's reference to a year of the Lord's favor bespeaks amidst so much that is present, not as we wish in the world today. The prophet's words bespeak a promise that amidst our many challenges exists the promise of positive change and spiritual renewal.

A personal story – This past month a dear friend of mine, he and his family marked an important milestone. Having traveled the last three years with their son, as the family navigated his cancer diagnosis and treatment for pediatric lymphoma, an arduous and painful ordeal on every level, believe me there were many prayers expressing please. Amidst cries of great anguish and fear, just this last month they reached a milestone. Official remission. And their son, now 14 years old, was finally, at least for now and hopefully forever, cancer-free. And my friend writes of their present reality on the cusp of the new year, looking back. The overwhelming theme of our cancer experience has been, ironically, gratitude. It is a strange truth, he continues, a strange truth that the chapters of our lives involving adversity and suffering are often those that teach us most to appreciate our blessings.

From please, to thank you, to wow. My friends, it is no secret that the last few years have been very challenging for us as a country, for the world, for each of us individually in our own particular ways. And yet, it has been my experience that even in the face of these setbacks and losses and disappointments that I am able to recall the reminders and the gains, the reassurances and the blessed friendships that have sustained me. Though it would be easy to focus on what is no more or what will now no longer be, I am truly grateful to be able to see now more clearly and in the words of the prophet Isaiah to greatly rejoice and exult in all that I have been provided by Calvary Church, by your clergy, by so many of you in the grace and goodness of your friendship, by our faith and confidence in God's gifts, in all that we do possess and in our individual and collective ability for Zion's sake not to be silent as we go forth into the new year and the rest of our lives grateful for God, and grateful for God's goodness and gifts, and glad in our vindications and victories and our many manifold blessings. May this new year about which we are to enter, may it provide us all with many reasons for prayers of gratitude and for praise. And I wish you all in the Hebrew vernacular, Shana Tovah, may it be for all of us a year of goodness and gratitude, always. Amen.