This morning I had a little trouble figuring out how to best begin my sermon, so I decided to search the Internet to see what, if anything, others might have to say about the “the discipline of gratitude.” To my surprise, I quickly learned that this term is not my own, that many others have also intuited the connection between gratitude and discipline. In fact, one of the first items to come up was a sermon entitled “The Discipline of Gratitude,” by Reverend Galen Guengerich, the senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In it he said, “…my conviction is that the defining element of our faith should be gratitude. In the same way as Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude.”¹ That’s a pretty bold statement, but his reasoning is sound. Rev. Guengerich seems to look at gratitude as a connecting force, or, at least, as that perspective through which we can most easily recognize our connection to all things, to what we Unitarian Universalists call the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Indeed, he makes the challenging and compelling argument that gratitude ought to be the primary emphasis of our faith, not freedom and liberty, as many of us might suppose. This is so, he says, because, “the word religion does not mean to liberate or set free, but rather to bind together.” He’s right of course. The word religion contains the same root from which we get words like “legion” and “ligament.” Religion, at its best, reconnects us to others and Other, to all our relations. “Religion,” as Rev. Guengerich goes on to say, “unites the purpose of our lives as human beings with the purpose that animates the universe. Religion unites the meaning of our lives as human beings with the meaning that pervades the universe. Religion unites the spirit of humanity with the spirit that keeps the stars shining, the planets spinning, and the flowers blooming in springtime. I believe that gratitude is the appropriate religious response to the nature of the universe.”²

If this is the meaning of religion, that which reconnects us, or rejoins us, then we can agree that its opposite is that which separates us, or leaves us feeling isolated, which just so happens to be the traditional meaning of the word sin. Religion rejoins. Sin separates. And there are lots of things that separate us and isolate us in this world—economics, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality—but they all boil down to our paradigms, that is, to those notions that falsely enable us to accept that we are somehow superior or inferior to others, and I’m not just talking about other human beings. When we feel superior, and, therefore, separate from the Earth and other creatures, we do

² Ibid.
horrible things to the environment and other animals, in the same way that we brutalize and oppress people we wrongly consider our inferiors. Our sense of separation from Nature and others causes us to sin against them.

So those religions that promote paradigms of separation, ideologies of us-against-them, the righteous against sinners, the saved against the lost, the straights against the gays, Heaven against Earth, are not really religions at all. They are sinful paradigms because they’re based on separation, isolationism, exclusion, and superiority. Those ideologies, on the other hand, that promote unity and inclusion are truly religions. And gratitude, in particular, seems to be the principle through which genuine religion discards our sinful ideas and enables us to better perceive our proper relationship to the world. Thomas Aquinas said, “Religion is supreme thankfulness or gratitude,” and, “Every ingratitude is a sin.”

In this sense, then, gratitude is more than a feeling, it is an obligation, that is, it’s an intentional response to the world, as well as an outlook we ought to strive to keep in mind. In other words, it’s a spiritual discipline. True, the feeling of gratitude usually emerges spontaneously, after receiving a kindness. Someone offers us a gift, or a compliment, or a warm greeting, and we say “thank you,” without effort or thought. But the word, “thanks,” actually stems from the word, “think.” To be thankful really means being thoughtful. Gratitude is a kind of awareness. Thankfulness is mindfulness. So the Discipline of Gratitude is rooted in the common goal of all spiritual practice—awareness, enlightenment, mindfulness, nirvana, or whatever else we might call it. Gratitude represents our struggle to remain open-minded, which isn’t always easy to do. That’s why it requires discipline, intention, thoughtfulness. In his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen, the famous Jesuit priest, writes, “Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice.” It’s easy to feel grateful when someone is nice to us, but it’s not always so easy to maintain a grateful outlook, especially when things aren’t going so well. Yet, Nouwen goes on to suggest that, “I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart still responds in bitterness. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly.”

In a 1996 New Yorker article entitled, “Hating Hillary,” the then First Lady, Hillary Clinton spoke of Father Nouwen’s work and explained her own attempt to practice the discipline of gratitude by pointing to a nearby bowl of pink roses. “I mean, you look at those flowers and you think, ‘My gosh, if my life were to end tomorrow, how lucky I’ve been that nearly all my life I’ve been surrounded by flowers.’ This takes us back to the point Rev. Guengerich makes, that gratitude connects us to other beings, even to things as

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Fonzie’s Prayer

seemingly insignificant as flowers. In *Rhymes and Reasons*, John Denver sings, “The children and the flowers are my sisters and my brothers. Their laughter and their loveliness would clear a cloudy day.” Reflecting on the origins of this song, he said, “It comes from the very real and consistent thought that the children and the flowers are my sisters and my brothers. I do not feel separate from any aspect or form of life.” Notice the terms he uses here, “consistent thought,” and “I do not feel separate.” Thoughtfulness is thankfulness, and thankfulness reconnects us to all beings. Gratitude is a broader paradigm that recognizes we are all part of one Universe, all beings related in the interconnected web of all existence.

Some say that when the first astronauts to land on the moon returned with their birds’ eye view of the Earth that they forever changed the way we see ourselves. Certainly the image of our beautiful blue planet, the most downloaded image in the Internet, strikes an archetypal chord in the collective unconscious, but we don’t have to travel to the moon to recognize our circle of connections. Long before anyone traveled into space, Chief Black Elk spoke of the boyhood vision he’d received of the Earth as a Sacred Hoop containing all beings. “Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”

So gratitude is a feeling of connection to others, and, ultimately, to all that is, and may, therefore, be considered the most important spiritual discipline in any religion; since, again, religion is supposed to be about reconnection. “Gratitude is a uniquely religious virtue,” Reverend Guengerich says, “[Because] In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. Both are experiences of transcendence, of being part of something much larger than ourselves.” We tend to think of ourselves mostly as individuals. But none of us exists without others. Indeed, as I believe, we are nothing without our relationships. We are our relationships. Guengerich says, “The first principle of the universe is not independence, but its opposite: utter dependence!” We each utterly depend on everything else, and should, therefore, be grateful to everything and everyone for our own existence. We should say thanks to all that is, which means being mindful of and thoughtful toward all beings.

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8 Ibid.
Fonzie’s Prayer

Whenever I think about what it means to be truly grateful, I hearken back to an old episode of *Happy Days*. For those of us old enough to remember this iconic TV series, you’ll recall that Howard Cunningham, the show’s loveable patriarch, didn’t care much for his son’s thuggish friend, Arthur Fonzarelli, aka, “The Fonz,” who was, at the time, the coolest guy ever. During one memorable Christmas episode, Mr. Cunningham was insistent on having a family-only celebration. Meanwhile, Fonzie, having turned down various invitations, was stuck in his garage eating ravioli out of a can. But as fate would have it, a couple of mechanical breakdowns occur and the Fonz is needed at Cunningham’s house to help fix a broken Santa and some tree lights. Before we know it, Fonzie is part of the Cunningham’s holiday gathering. When they all finally sit down to eat, Fonzie offers to say the prayer, causing some anxiety, especially from Howard who has no idea what to expect. All bows their heads but the Fonz. Instead, he looks upward, eyes open, and with a sentiment as profound as it was brief, delivered his coolest line ever, “Hey God, thanks.” At first the others look troubled by his brevity, as if their first instinct is that there must be more to a good prayer. But they soon realize it is not only more than enough, it is the only thing that should be said. Fonzie, who had been eating alone in his cold garage, finding himself unexpectedly part of a family communion says the only thing that really needs to be said; “Thanks.”

Gratitude connects us, and our connections should make us grateful. “Gratitude,” says Nouwen, “goes beyond the ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift… The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.”

Would you please pray with me? Hey God, thanks!