

Good Grief!—Giving Out of Gratitude
Joel 2:23-24, 26-28
Luke 17:11-19
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer
 Lynnewood United Methodist Church
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This past week the season has changed. We've entered fall, a season of cooler weather, rain, and harvest. . It's dark in the morning when I walk along the vineyards. The grape vines have that yeasty smell now. It feels good to turn the oven on and have a hot meal around a family table. And even if you don't have a family, or you don't eat around a family table, perhaps you have memories of such a warm, autumn scene. We aren't quite at Thanksgiving, but we are at a time of harvest, and with that comes a sense of gratitude.

I think more than any other Peanuts character, Linus understands gratitude. He has a child's wonder and appreciation. Let's listen to his conversation with Lucy.

(Linus has his blanket and thumb in his mouth.)

Lucy: I guess you're glad to have your stupid blanket back.

Linus: Getting a security blanket back is like seeing the flood waters recede...

It's like a reunion with old friends! It's like a drop of water to a man lost in a desert!

Getting your security blanket back is like coming out of a dark cave into the wonderful sunlight! It's like...

(Lucy takes the blanket and tries to tie it around his mouth!)

I still had thirty-five similes to go!

Charles Schulz likes to juxtapose Linus with Lucy. You can often see that "Lucifer" streak come out. About this time of year, Linus is all excited about Halloween. He writes a letter to the Great Pumpkin while Lucy looks on:

"Dear Great Pumpkin, oh, how I look forward to your arrival on Halloween night. When you rise out of the Pumpkin Patch, and fly through the air, please bring me lots of presents." To Lucy, he says, "Are you still planning to help me mail this letter?"

"Of course! I said I would and I will!" she says.

He goes on writing, "My sister Lucy is going to help me mail this letter, so please bring her lots of presents too. "How's that?"

"Fine."

They go to the mailbox with the letter, and Lucy gets down on her hands and knees, and Linus stands on her back to reach the mailbox. Face to the ground, Lucy says, "Greed makes people do strange things."

Lucy is motivated by greed, but not Linus. Linus is full of joy and anticipation. He wants to spread the joy around and get all the Peanuts kids excited about the Great Pumpkin. He is grateful for the celebration!

Linus is very easily pleased, really. He's quite taken with his teacher, Miss Othmar, and tells Charlie Brown, "I think Miss Othmar likes me...This morning she was calling the roll...She said, 'David, Betty, Craig, William, Tony, Mary, Tommy, Cynthia' ...and then she said, 'Linus,' that's just the way she said it...'Linus' ...she came right out, and said my name just as plain as day. I think Miss Othmar really likes me."

Another time, Lucy is in a huff, complaining: "I think it is possible to be too nice! By golly, nobody's gonna walk all over me! No sir! If anybody's gonna do any walking, it's gonna be me! There's only one way to survive these days...you have to walk over *them* before they walk over *you*!"

Linus turns to Charlie Brown and says, "It must be nice to have a philosophy that will sustain you in times of need!"

Linus generally sees the good in others. He is a philosopher and a poet, and a theologian. When Lucy and he are looking out at the rain, Lucy says, "Boy, look at it rain...what if it floods the whole world?"

Linus responds, "It will never do that...in the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow."

Lucy says, "You've taken a great load off my mind..."

Linus says simply, "Sound theology has a way of doing that."

Little Linus teaches us to believe in the promise and to be grateful for the good things in life. I wonder what things you are grateful for this day. Let's call them out...

My list includes family, church, jobs, food, shelter, friends, freedom, education, books, music, flowers, nature, rain, a good fire, the crisp fall air, time to rest, romance, committed relationship, and memories.... We have much to be grateful for. I have a friend who writes in a gratitude journal each night before she goes to bed. She writes down all the things she thinks of at the end of her day that she is grateful for. It's a nice way to end the day. It's her daily prayer to God.

I imagine, each of us here has a good, long list of things to be grateful for. But sometimes you may find yourself instead venting a host of complaints. It's a matter of how you look at situations, whether they are things to complain about or things to be grateful for.

For instance, one might complain about a cancer diagnosis: "Why me? This isn't fair." But another way of looking at it, is if you have to have cancer, this is the best country in the world for cancer treatment. And you have health insurance, and a family and a church to support you through it.....

You might complain about your losing money in the stock market. But another way of thinking about it, is how fortunate you are to have savings at all, and no one said for sure that the stock market would be secure.

You might complain about your children not getting their lives together, not finding work or finishing their education, or not dealing well with addiction or whatever life choices they face. But you might also be grateful that you have children and that you have a relationship with them in spite of tensions and problems. You might be grateful that you have the opportunity to offer to them grace and unconditional love.

When we live with the perspective of gratitude, we can be generous. We have been generously blessed, and we want to give the blessing on. We have the opportunity here at church to give the blessing on. Next week we will consecrate our financial pledges for the coming year.

To consecrate means to make holy. We make our gifts holy by promising them to God. It is a pledge that honors our relationship with God.

And ultimately, as Christians we are grateful not only for the tangible gifts we recognize as blessings, but also for the promise of an abiding presence of the love of Christ in our lives. We see this theology played out in the "Gospel according to Peanuts." We see it in particular in Linus. Linus leaves the house, and Lucy ask him, "Where are you going?" He answers, "I'm going to spend the night at Charlie Brown's house..." In bed with Charles Brown, Linus says, "Do you ever have prowlers around here, Charlie Brown?"

"Why, are you scared?"

"Oh, I'm always sort of worried about prowlers..."

"You forget that we have a watchdog here..."

"You mean Snoopy?" Is he a good watchdog?"

"I don't think there's a better one..."

They go to the window and look out, and then Linus goes back to bed, lays his head on the pillow with a smile, "You're right...Seeing him out there on guard makes me feel a lot better!"

The last frame is Snoopy on top of his doghouse looking through his telescope in the night.

Robert Short analyzes Snoopy in the Peanuts comic strip and equates him with Jesus, whom he calls "the Dog God" (*The Parables of Peanuts*, 277). I can't bring myself to call Jesus a "Dog God." But I see his point and the idea behind Charles Schulz's portrayal of Snoopy as a faithful watchdog. God is watching over us.

Prophets like Joel speak of God's promise of God's presence no matter what calamities befall us. In Joel's time, there had been swarms of locusts, and then God promised sweet rain and a full harvest of grain. God promises restore peace and prosperity. And "after that" God will pour out God's spirit upon everyone. The spirit of hope is intended for all! And what will be our response? Will we walk away without expressing our gratitude like the nine who were covered in skin diseases and after they were healed by Jesus, they just walked away? Or will we be grateful and be touched by the healing vision that God pours out on us? Will we prophesy a better life for all? Will we dream dreams? Will we see visions of God's future? Will we come to God's altar with our gifts out of gratitude? Will we return to God and say thank you?

A great spiritual leader, Thomas Merton, said, "Gratitude takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder, and to praise of the goodness of God." May we be like children—like Linus—and experience new wonder, and then praise the goodness of God.