

## ***“THOU SHALT CULTIVATE A GRATEFUL HEART”***

Sermon III in the Series **Ten COMMANDMENTS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Rev. Scott Alexander

November 21, 2010

This morning, I continue my year-long sermon series on ***“Ten Commandments for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*** – offering ten behavioral “rules” which I believe will help us as human persons to live full and joyous and responsible lives. Today, I want to spiritually suggest that day-in-and-day-out in your life you should **Cultivate a Grateful Heart**, which for those of you who were here last Sunday and heard my sermon on “Happiness” is a bit of a spiritual sequel to that sermon. I passionately believe that **cultivating everyday gratitude** for life as you already have it is one of the most important things any person can do to enrich and ensure the quality of their lives and relationships. I want to begin making my case by telling you true (and, to me at least, important) story from my own life... which I think speaks directly to this all important injunction to work at being more grateful in your day-to-day life.

Back in the Spring of 2008, I took a month’s sabbatical leave, from my duties at the congregation I was then serving in Bethesda, Maryland, to ride a bike across America – 120 miles a day, 3,000 miles in all...with 30 other crazy “type-A jock personalities,” from Los Angeles, California, to Savannah, Georgia, in the process raising more than \$12,000 for a wonderful health clinic in Washington, DC, that provided free medical care for recent Latino immigrants.

Now...it’s important for you to know that I had done a cross-country bike ride like this before! In 2005, I rode from Los Angeles to Boston, some 3,300 miles, and so I knew something about what I would experience over the physically grueling ride. But as the 2008 ride approached, and I began anticipating and planning the repeat-adventure, I realized that, in spite of having immensely enjoyed my first trans-continental ride, I wanted to do some things very differently on this **second** trip across the country. It’s not that I wanted a different bike, or different tires, or new biking clothes, or a different riding or pedaling technique, even. What I wanted was to be spiritually different with myself and with others as I rode again from the Pacific to the Atlantic. I wanted in a word to be more grateful...and to complain less!

As I am sure you can imagine, on a demanding cross-country bike ride, there are almost endless things to complain about. If you want to, you can complain about the weather...about the motel accommodations...about the meals...about the route directions...about the roughness of the road surfaces...about the 18 wheeler truck exhaust...about the support staff...about flat tires...mechanical breakdowns...sunburn...the dogs that chase you – trust me, on a cross-country ride there are endless things to complain about – some of them more than justified! In fact, the truth is that on such a ride you can spend a good deal of your time complaining about all the many things that aren’t quite right or perfectly to your liking!

In fact, let me tell you about one of the Riders who shared that trip with me...I’ll call him “Will,” and he was a near professional complainer. For the entire month we rode together Will – a self-confident, and yes, rich and entitled, corporate executive from Illinois – had abundant

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complaints, he would share at the drop of a hat, about almost everything! Nothing seemed to satisfy him...he was always griping about something. Indeed on the very last day of the ride – at the breakfast table I shared with him in Vidalia, Georgia, before we got on our bikes to take the beautiful day-long ride to the pristine beach at Savannah – without provocation, he lit into two of the ride staff sitting at our table, complaining vociferously about the quality and diversity of the lunch fare they had served us each day – as though the hard working staff, who spent all-day, every day, fixing our flats, dispensing sun screen and keeping track of the safety and comfort of all the riders, – had nothing else to do than prepare gourmet hot lunches for him! Will’s angry complaints that last morning on the ride ruined the breakfast for everyone at the table, most especially the staff members to whom he pointedly directed his griping. Trust me...on a cross-country bike ride, being a “whiner” and “complainer” makes you unpleasant to be with!

In any case...as I prepared for this second cross-country trek, I spiritually decided weeks in advance that this time on the bike, I would consciously, purposefully, and consistently not complain about everything under the sun. I would engage in a spiritual practice, not complain out loud about anything...not to my fellow riders...not to the staff...not even to those many people who were following my journey on my daily blog on the Internet...even when inside I was feeling a bit grumpy and dissatisfied with something! Unlike the first trip when I must admit, I joined in, day-in-and-day-out, when other riders complained about this and that this time I spiritually decided I would strive to ride complaint-free – or to say it positively, I would strive to be a grateful, happy rider!

Now...I must tell you that I got the idea about not complaining as a spiritual practice from a minister in Topeka, Kansas, the Rev. Will Bowen....who after noticing that he and almost everybody else around him in his affluent suburb was complaining with a fierce regularity in their lives started a movement called “A COMPLAINT- FREE WORLD.” Perhaps some of you are familiar with this movement...Here is how it works. If you want to stop complaining – and thus become more grateful and satisfied in your life – you obtain one of these little purple wrist-bands and put it on either wrist. The goal of the program is to go 21 days which is how long some leading psychologists says it takes for a human being to establish a new emotional habit in his or her life to go 21 days without complaining out loud to anyone about anything! Now...you may not at first think this is hard, but the rub is that every time catch yourself complaining out loud even a little bit!, you must switch the band to the other wrist, and start over on the 21-day challenge! The truth is it takes most people several if not many months to successfully complete this challenge – and some folks fail this challenge completely. And rare is the person – especially here in complaint-orientated America! – who only has to occasionally switch the wrist band from one wrist to the other.

So...as I rode from California to Georgia that spring, every day I faithfully wore two things: 1) My bike helmet (which is, of course a safety requirement for any sane cyclist), and 2) this little purple

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bracelet on my wrist to remind me to be grateful for everything about the ride and my companions, and to refrain from complaining when something didn't go my way.

Now...I must be truthful and tell you that, in spite of the fact that I was pretty darned diligent with this “stop complaining” spiritual practice of mine, I did not succeed, on my second cross-country ride, from eliminating all complaining, whining and griping from my lips and my heart. Over the course of the journey, I did have to switch my bracelet from one wrist to the other more-than-a-few-times over that month. Honestly, I was simply not able to completely eliminate complaining from my life. But what I did succeed in doing over those 30 days was become routinely grateful for almost every aspect of this trip. As I happily rode my way across this vast and beautiful country. I kept reminding myself of the old bicyclist slogan, “Any day on a bicycle beats a day in the office!”

And so... while other riders were habitually and unconsciously complaining about tepid toast at breakfast...or the cold, driving rain that struck first thing in the morning...or the obnoxious/aggressive interstate truckers who occasionally roared past us...blowing their horns in irritation...or the ride leader's inability to get our route map precisely correct...or the road debris that was causing so many flats...or the quality of the peanut butter we were served at lunch – while others habitually and unconsciously complained about this and that – I succeeded in maintaining not a perfect, but an over-arching attitude of gratitude within my soul. I wasn't sure as I made the long and wondrous trek that any of my fellow travelers were particularly aware of my little purple wristband and the grateful spiritual practice that it represented. But when we got safely to Savannah, at the closing banquet several of the riders surprised me by coming up to me and without any prompting on my part saying to me, “You know Scott, you were the most positive and enjoyable rider on this trip, you never seemed to be down or irritable, I really enjoyed making this crossing with you.” I just smiled, and thanked them for their kind observation, and realized that while I know I slipped every now and again my decision to stop complaining and be grateful as a spiritual practice had in the main worked...both for me and my companions on the trip.

Alright...now that's a rather long personal story I have shared...so what does all this have to do with all of us? Well, I'm so glad you asked, dear friends!...because here whether you are ready for it or not in a nutshell is what I think my decision to cultivate a grateful heart on my last cross-country bike ride has to do with every last one of us. Your minister, this guy right here, is passionately persuaded that purposefully cultivating a grateful heart is one of the most important day-to-day spiritual – and emotional – decisions any of us can make in our lives. If we are able to move through our days routinely living from a place of simple gratitude and appreciation – rather than from a stance of dissatisfaction and complaint – our lives will surely be much more satisfying and rewarding...both for ourselves and those who are obliged to share life with us.

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The other day – for no particular reason – I decided to take a simple spiritual inventory of all the ordinary, yet astoundingly sustaining gifts I routinely receive in my life...everyday gifts that deserve my faithful expressions of gratitude. Here is my list, tell me if yours is even-a-little-bit-similar:

Each day, here in the most abundant and predictable country on earth, I routinely have enough food to eat and enough liquid to drink...

I have a reliable roof over my head and several pleasant rooms to call my home, and just the right clothing (several loud Hawaiian shirts included!) to make each season comfortable...

I have reasonably good eyes which permit me to read poetry and drink in sunsets...

I have a nose that allows me to take in all of this creation’s intriguing aromas...and a tongue with which to taste the multitudinous flavors of the world...

And ears that while not as keen as they once were nonetheless enable me to hear the manifold music and messages of this world...

I have a brain, a reasonable piece of functioning hardware, which is – most of the time – connected coherently to my mouth in ways that allow me to express myself and communicate meaningfully with the world and other persons...

And – chronic arthritis aside – I have legs that carry me wherever I choose...frequently on a bicycle...in this amazing creation of ours...

And hands with which I can touch and tend the world...

And lips that let me talk and kiss...laugh and smile...

And a body that most of the time feels like a happy old, reliable friend.

All this is MINE...amazingly, gloriously MINE...

And with a full and simple heart I am profoundly grateful for it.

Now...don’t get me wrong. Like all human beings, I have my share of complaints and caveats about the way things are working or not working out for me in this creation. And I’d be happy, without much urging – on some other occasion, maybe – to painstakingly catalogue those existential

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gripes for any of you who have the patience or inclination to listen!. But for today...this week of our national thanksgiving holiday...in the year 2010...I simply want to affirm with full and grateful heart the over-arching grace and blessing of my life. All in all, by almost any human standard you can apply, I have much to be grateful for. Mine is an abundant life in an abundant creation...and I know deep to my heart this morning that I am truly a pretty lucky guy...and I suspect that most of you when you think about it, and face the generally pleasant realities of your life could have to affirm the same thing.

It was Catholic mystic Thomas Merton who once famously said, *“If you manage only one prayer in your life, and that prayer is simply ‘THANK YOU,’ it will be sufficient.”*

But, honestly, I like even more the rather testy way which my favorite Pogo comic strip – which some of you are old enough to remember – put the same spiritual affirmation. Pogo, written and drawn for American newspapers by Walt Kelly from 1948 until 1975, was set in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. In one famous strip, **Churchy La Femme**, the rather silly turtle character, is passing the day with **Porky-Pine**, the wise but cynical character in that leaky little boat down in the leaky little swamp which they call home. Churchy is reading a newspaper, the headline of which boldly proclaims, *“SUN TO BURN OUT IN 3 BILLION YEARS, ENDING ALL LIFE ON EARTH”* which causes the silly turtle to burst into tears, crying, *“WOE IS ME...I’M TOO YOUNG TO DIE!”* To which the ever-wise Porky responds in the last panel...*“AH, SHUT UP, YOU’RE LUCKY TO BE HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!”* Now, of course your ever-sensitive minister would never use such blunt and harsh language in a Sunday service, but the spiritual truth is, dear friends, most of us – no...all of us – are lucky just to be here in the first place.

Theologian Matthew Fox – in a more spiritual tone – writes about how gratitude enriches our lives, even (or perhaps most especially) when we face human hardship:

*Gratitude [he writes] changes our lives. It fills us with energy and vitality. When I was 12 years old [he goes on] I had polio and could not walk for 6 months. The doctors could not reassure me I would ever walk again. As it turned out, I DID get my legs back. But I learned a [spiritual] lesson in the process that I have never forgotten: DON’T TAKE FOR GRANTED. I had taken my legs for granted – legs that work, legs that run and play ball, legs that take me exactly where I want to go. When my legs returned to me [as the polio receded], I was filled with gratitude. Not gratitude for the “miracle” of my legs being healed, but rather gratitude for [my] having legs at all! I was filled with energy [Fox concludes] and promised myself that I would not waste my legs for as long as I lived.*

Perhaps it is the very ordinary-ness of daily life which makes us susceptible to taking it “for granted” which Fox talks about. Cynthia Ozick, in her amazing essay *“The Riddle of the Ordinary”*

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points out how we human beings (quite naturally) often fail to have or express gratitude for life's countless ordinary blessings. The ordinary, she writes,

*“by making itself so noticeable (it is around us all the time) has gotten itself in a bad [spiritual] fix with us: we hardly ever notice it. The Ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful. When something does not insist on being noticed, when we aren't grabbed by the collar or struck on [the side of] the skull by a presence or an event, we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude. And this is the chief and deepest point concerning the Ordinary; that it DOES deserve our gratitude. The ordinary [she concludes] is above all what is expected, and what is expected is not often thought of as a gift.”*

I like the way my colleague Roy Phillips once put it in a newsletter column addressed to the members of the congregation he served:

*This is it! This is the day you have been waiting for. If my words come to you when you are down in the dumps, you may ask, “What's so special about today?” We notice the specialness of this day when we consider the IMAGINABLE OPPOSITE: no day – that is un-life, non-being, death. [Right now] your chest rises and falls; air streams in and out of your lungs, blood courses through your veins – you are aware, you are alive. “But there is this that I'm worried about; there's that which troubles me, there are these things going on today which keep me from enjoying myself, my world, other people...life.” I do not want to be hard on you [Phillips continues] yet I must say it. If you plan to wait to live fully until a day comes when there are no obstacles, no hardships, then you will wait past your time for waiting. [And then Phillips ends] Life is to be lived and enjoyed now – in this time, right now, in the midst of all the [imperfection] and troublesome circumstances. This is it. This IS the day you have been waiting for.*

Alright folks, this is the place in the sermon where – as the old Southern preachers used to say --“*THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD.*” Or, to put it another way, this is the point in the sermon where I move “*FROM PREACHIN' TO MEDDLIN!*” I have here a large glass platter containing hundreds of purple “Stop Complaining” bracelets.

Right!...I conveniently have an abundance of “Stop Complaining” bracelets for you to take home with you this morning. And here is the challenge I am making to you this Sunday before Thanksgiving. I ask that as this service ends, all of you who are prepared to challenge yourself on working in your life to stop your whining and complaining – and genuinely cultivating a more grateful heart, you come forward to this table, take a bracelet, and if you want to drop a buck into this basket to help defray the cost of these, that's great, because they cost the fellowship \$1.00 each, put it on

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one of your wrist, and begin the “complaint-free” challenge. If mobility issues will make it difficult for you to come forward to this table, please ask someone near you to get a bracelet for you. And...If you want to pick up additional bracelets for your spouse, or your kids, or your co-workers, or a neighbor or friend, or your grumpy sister you have in Chicago – feel free to do so after everyone in the congregation has had a chance to get one this morning. And if for any reason we run out of bracelets this morning, I will order more and have them to distribute some Sunday soon.

Now again, you know the rest of how this challenge works...just slip your bracelet on one wrist or the other (or...if you don't like things on your wrists, put the bracelet in one of your pockets each morning when you get dressed)...and begin paying attention to what you say, and whether or not you succeed in not complaining to anyone about anything! And remember...whenever you catch yourself complaining – whenever you catch yourself not living from a grateful, appreciative place – move that bracelet from the one wrist or pocket to the other, with the goal of eventually...eventually going a full 21 days without verbally uttering a negativity. I must warn you – as I have already said, dear friends – this is not as easy a challenge as it at first might seem. For most of us Americans, regular complaining is an ingrained habit that will take a while to break...but this challenge is worth taking, because if you succeed at it, you will notice that working at cultivating a grateful non-complaining heart makes your life much more spiritually rewarding.

So I hope most-if-not-all of you will come forward at the end of the service, take a bracelet, and give my spiritual challenge a try. Work, over the coming days and weeks, at living your life more gratefully and with fewer complaints and criticisms ...and then, come to **the special brown bag lunch** I have now scheduled for noon on Tuesday, January 11 – about seven weeks from now – when we will together share with one another about how we have done with this gratitude/stop complaining challenge.

Well...dear friends...that's all I've got for you this Thanksgiving Sunday. I pray that each and every one of you will on some level or another take up this challenge to “cultivate a grateful heart” and thus reduce the habitual whining and complaining that so infects your life. I urge you to do so not only because(as it did for my fellow riders biking across America make life more pleasant for those who share life's journey with you...but more importantly because this simple spiritual practice it will lift and lighten your days, making your journey on this earth evermore a work of gratitude and joy.

AMEN.