

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Peals of delight permeated the air around the pavilion at Brackenridge Park in San Antonio one Friday afternoon, as my dog and I stumbled upon a full-blown water balloon fight among the graduating senior class of the local high school.

They were really into it! Not a single person stayed dry. The jocks, the nerds, the teacher's pets. If you were a senior, you were soaked! When they ran out of balloons they moved on to water bottles. And water fountains. And water buckets! They found any way they could to just flat out *pummel* each other with water, in their senior picnic bliss.

I was jealous. I wanted in on the fun. And so did my dog. She was jumping from one puddle to the next, lapping up the remnants and wagging her tail with joy the entire time. So we strolled up next to one of the teachers, who was chaperoning the crowd, to see if we could pass for teenagers.

[We could not.]

Partly, the teacher was laughing. And partly, she was sighing. "Four years of stressing over lesson plans to prepare them for the global economy," she said, with a smirk on her face and a shake of her head. "Four years of writing stellar exams and grading papers well into the night. And all I have taught them boils down to *this?!"*

It really was a sight to behold. All that water. All that laughter. All those tax dollars and teacher training hours running down the drain.

And yet, if you think about it, isn't wading in the whooping laughter of a water balloon fight what we would *all* rather be doing on a late Friday afternoon? Instead of rushing through traffic, running for the train, frantic and frenetic from one more work-week of too much stress and not enough substance?

"I didn't know I was grateful for such late-autumn bent-up cornfields," our guest poet writes in our "alternative reading" this morning.

"End lonely days, I believe," he says. "End the exiled and unraveling strangeness."

Isn't that what those teenagers were doing that day?

Isn't that what we all need to be doing every day, what the Psalmist is doing, as he meditates on God's wondrous acts?

What if, instead of that dreadful "Protestant work ethic" that has been driving our culture so fast and for so long, our lives could be something more like what those graduating seniors were doing with their water balloons and their peals of laughter?

What if our lives are actually *supposed* to be something more like what those seniors were doing, with their water balloons and their peals of laughter?

What if our true vocation—as *the people of God*—really is "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as the founders of this nation declared? Not just as a Friday afternoon senior picnic on the way to graduation but as the way of life we are called to live in praise of the glorious majesty that is the God of all creation?

The pursuit of happiness, this *joie de vivre*, this attitude of gratitude, is, as we say in this country, an unalienable *right*. "Endowed by [our] Creator."

So you could say this water balloon fight on a Friday afternoon in sunny San Antonio was actually a *good* use of our tax dollars at work. You could even call it "citizenship education"!

Would you believe “the pursuit of happiness,” the attitude of gratitude, is also enshrined in the Protestant—Presbyterian—conviction of what it means *to be human*? That, according to our tradition, joy and laughter and frolicking in God’s good creation are *the entire point* of human existence?

We Presbyterians used to require our children to memorize what we call “The Westminster Catechism,” a long set of questions written in the 17th century about the Bible and the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. The Westminster Catechism was designed to teach the essentials of the faith for generations to come.

We do not memorize these questions anymore, and I am not necessarily suggesting we should. But we should at least teach the first one, which goes like this:

“What is the chief end of man?”

Or, in 21st century gender-inclusive language, “what is the primary purpose of human existence?”

The answer: “To glorify God ... *and enjoy God forever!*”

Does that sound like *drudgery*?!

It all goes back to the book of Genesis, as just about everything in our tradition does. In the garden. Of the good creation.

That beautiful chapter two (about which I preached my very first Sunday as your pastor) where humanity is formed, from the earth, to join our “creator” God as a “co-creator” in Paradise. To make life *flourish*, so that joy and beauty might bless the world. Our common creativity. Our common joy. *This* is the whole point of our existence!

It stands in direct contrast with the creation stories of other cultures in the ancient near east that compete with the Genesis story of creation. The Sumerians, for example, believed humanity was created as “*grunt labor*” for the gods. That the lot of the human race really *was* to work ourselves into oblivion.

But in Genesis we are simply created for *joy*. For companionship. For continued creativity. For life in full abundance. Cultivated for the common good.

Our job as human beings—our truest and most honest *vocation*—is simply to say “thank you” to God. For this gift of life. For this gift of creativity. And to live in a spirit of gratitude all the days of our life. Extolling our God. With peals of delight. Splashing through the overflowing fountains of God’s baptismal grace. “Entering this music that translates the world back into dirt fields.” Blessing God’s Name forever, as we tend the glorious garden we have been given as our home.

Which is what “thanks-giving” in its truest sense is really all about.

Which is what we celebrate this week. And every week to come.

Amen.