

*Everything is a gift. The degree to which we are awake to this truth is a measure of our gratefulness, and gratefulness is a measure of our aliveness.*

—DAVID STEINDL-RAST

Like any good book-hoarder, I often forget what I have sitting on my (virtual) shelves until I stumble across something that catches my attention. This week it was *Grateful: The Subversive Power of Giving Thanks*, by Diana Butler Bass. Fitting, I guess, that this particular volume would pop-up just ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday.

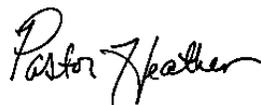
Bass, a church historian and writer, begins with a personal confession: that she has often felt as though she, “struggled with gratitude. I want to be grateful, but too often I find myself with no thanks.” And so like any academic worth her salt she began to research gratitude, looking not only at the history of the word and the cultural traditions of the practice, but also at scientific studies. Many of which noted that gratitude, or being thankful, actually had positive health benefits.

What she came to was this: that traditionally, western culture most often understands thankfulness as a debt-and-duty system. In other words, gratitude was required for any gift given which then carries a sense of required indebtedness, creating a closed circle. This even tends to invade our theology: We give praise and thanks and then God rewards us with a place in heaven. And so our relationship to God becomes a duty, a debt paid in order to receive continued gifts.

However, Bass argues, that as Christians we might take the opportunity to re-frame that idea. Rather than begin with the giver, we might begin with the gift. Noting that everything, including our lives, is a gift, she suggests we consider a gift-response approach to gratefulness. “Gifts bring forth gratitude, and we express our appreciation by passing gifts on to others,” she contends. In other words, “we live on a gifted planet. Everything we need is here, with us. We freely respond to these gifts by choosing a life of mutual care.” God’s gifts — life, the universe, and everything — are given freely without any expectation. Gifts are grace, and grace invites response. In this way, gratefulness is both feeling and practice, both spiritual and tangible.

No doubt, I’ve done her work some serious injury by breaking it down into 2 paragraphs, not really having space for the nuance she spends many pages exploring. (Seriously, the book is an easy and rewarding read. Go get it.) But I am wondering what it might mean to me, and to you, to begin with the gift. How might framing gratefulness as a natural response rather than as required debt change your own relationship to God and to gratefulness?

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Heather". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.