

THANKSGIVING INCONGRUITIES

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Grace Church in New York
Thanksgiving Eve
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Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)

Before we turn our thoughts to Thanksgiving, first I'm going to speak of a subject I know almost nothing about: *Physics*. Physics is the branch of science concerned with the ultimate laws that govern the universe. What are the rules that all matter and energy must obey as they interact with each other? That's physics. The greatest goal of those who study physics, I'm told, is to discover what they call "the theory of everything." Their aim is to find a single theory that describes the whole universe: one theory that can accurately predict and explain all things visible and invisible. I assume they mean everything from the properties of time, light, and gravity, to the indigestion you will likely experience at some point tomorrow after a big feast. It's not a small goal, but the Einsteins of our day think it's attainable.

In pursuit of the one big theory, scientists have arrived at two smaller theories along the way – and here's where you really have to pay attention. The first is the theory of general relativity. The second is the theory of quantum mechanics. The theory of general relativity is about the big things that happen in the universe: the force of gravity, the speed of light, the formation of black holes in space. The theory of quantum mechanics is about the smallest of things that happen on a sub-atomic level. Both of these theories seem to work. You can use them to make accurate predictions about what will happen next, based on what just happened. But here's the problem that has confounded scientists for more than a century: these two theories are inconsistent with each other. They work by themselves, but they don't work together.

I don't know why this is so, but perhaps an analogy will help your understanding. Imagine that you are looking for a single, perfect outfit to wear. You have a pair of plaid pants, and let's just say that you really rock them. You look great in your plaid pants. Also, you have a striped shirt that accentuates your smoldering good looks, and even sets them on fire. No doubt about it, you look fabulous in your striped shirt. But you are likely to look incredibly silly if you wear your plaid pants and your striped shirt at the same time. They don't work together. At this point you are probably thinking that I failed High School physics. I did not! I just failed to take it altogether.

Now on to our beloved American holiday, Thanksgiving. In the Epistle traditionally appointed for today, St. James declares that *every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights*. And the hymn we've just sung strikes the same note in its refrain, *All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love*. We are here to do tonight in person and on the livestream to thank God for the many blessings sent from heaven above. If you really want to get serious about giving thanks, it will entail coming to a deeper awareness of your blessings. It will mean paying attention to your life, taking inventory, even *counting* every good and perfect gift. Such obvious things immediately come to mind: health, happiness, family, friends, food, and shelter, to say nothing of the luxuries we enjoy. James' theory is that these are blessings from God, worthy of our gratitude. It's a good theory. I like it. It works.

But here is the problem that confounds us: as you take inventory of your life, it won't be long before you notice that some pieces of it are not what you would call blessings at all: the illness

you either had or still have, the failure you endured, the stressful struggles, the lost job, the death in your family. These are the plaid pants to the striped shirt of James' theory. They clash with everything you want to wear. They have not inspired you to give thanks. What is more, you look around and see tremendous variation in how the Father of lights distributes the blessings. Many live life in the shadows and don't participate in the bounty. So there you have the two truths – the two observations – that just don't seem to work together: the gracious God who is the giver of every good gift, and a world full of hurt and despair. What shall we do with these incongruities? We can try to ignore them. We can try to lead compartmentalized lives, keeping our faith in one drawer and the harsh realities of life in another. In the end, perhaps we throw up our hands in defeat and say that what makes sense in one little corner of God's creation does not seem to make sense in another corner. God is inconsistent.

In tonight's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (6:25-33), Jesus speaks to us of another way. He speaks to us of some little forms of life in God's creation: consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. God is taking care of them, he says. In fact, Matthew quotes Jesus later on as saying that not a sparrow will fall to the ground without God's knowing it. God is governing the doings of these little ones. Then Jesus speaks to us about some very big and potentially frightening subjects: your life and mine, the future, the kingdom of God, and the biggest mystery of all, God himself. God is in control of these things, too, says Jesus. From the big things to the small things, from the life of a sparrow to the life of a person, from the troubles of today to the worries of tomorrow, from quantum mechanics to general relativity. God knows all of it. God is somehow holding together all the incongruous pieces of life and creation in the palm of his hand. The invitation of Jesus is for us not to worry about the things that don't seem to fit, but to be trusting of God. *Therefore I tell you*, he says, *do not worry about your life*.

Albert Einstein once made the comment, "God doesn't play dice." Do you dare this Thanksgiving to apply Einstein's notion to the life we've all been living? In this little corner of God's kingdom the year 2020 has hardly been one that many of us would care to repeat. As you know from our parish communications, it was last fall when we received a letter with the devastating allegations that a former choirmaster in the employ of Grace Church had abused a choirboy back in the 1990s. As we were attempting to mediate a settlement, three more former choristers came forward with official complaints of abuse. Next, the pandemic hit, closing our building and devastating the economy. It seemed that our fortunes turned sour on the roll of the dice. Then the neighborhood and city erupted in protest over racial injustice, and the demonstrations I saw up and down the street in front of Grace Church were angrier than anything I've seen in all the years of living here. Even today, for a few hours this afternoon, you could hear the drone of helicopters hovering overhead. It has been a year of one crisis after another.

Yet out of these crises have come opportunities. The lawsuits have allowed us to become aware of monstrous wrongs that were done in the name of this place and atone for them. The closure of our building propelled us into fully realizing the potential of the livestream equipment we had providentially installed. Now we have the capacity to stay connected even when far apart, and reach out to more people than ever before. The protests have awakened a new resolve in this country, we pray, to love the notion at the heart of our nation: that all of us are created equal. Indeed, some things have been unexpected, even incongruous blessings. Other things will be difficult ever to count as blessings.

God doesn't play dice with your life. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes from the Father of lights. I am ready to embrace the incongruous realities of life and faith even as they confound and confuse me. They don't always seem to fit together, and with all due respect to St. James, I experience plenty of shadow and variation. But as I take this inventory of my own life, and the life of our congregation, through it all I have sensed a timing, a support, a

presence, an intermingling of all things working together for God's purposes. Also I have known that presence to be personal, searching me out and knowing me, tracing my journeys and resting places, and being acquainted with all my ways.

Therefore, on this Thanksgiving of 2020, I am daring to give thanks that it all rests in God's hands. I am daring to look at my life not from the viewpoint of isolated incidents – be they happy or sad – but as God sees it: as a single piece that he holds together. Theologically speaking, I am daring to wear plaid pants and a striped shirt. The Scripture verse that comes to mind is from Romans (8:28): *All things work together for good to them that love God*. Another translation of St. Paul's words is, *All things intermingle for good to them that love God*. God doesn't play dice with your life.

Many of you know the short book by C.S. Lewis called The Screwtape Letters. The story is about the battle for the soul of an ordinary man, told from the viewpoint of the demons who are trying to subvert him. The demons assail the man with every imaginable temptation, both obvious and subtle. They try his patience, they nurture his anger, they steer him toward unhealthy relationships and watered down faiths. They goad him toward hatred, and try to feed every little vice he has. But they are unsuccessful. Always they are fighting against not just the man, but a force they call "the Enemy." The Enemy of the demons is, of course, God and the angels of heaven. God and the heavenly host are working at every moment to support this ordinary man, and hold the pieces of his life together. Through it all, the man is largely oblivious to the battle that is raging for ownership of his soul.

Until the end. At the end of the story the man dies and awakens in the presence of God and the angels. Lewis describes the moment with a memorable quote:

He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realized what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone. So that now he could say to them, one by one, not "Who are you?" but "So it was you all the time." And he saw not only Them, he saw Him.

God doesn't play dice with your life. All things intermingle for good to them that love God. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

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