

The third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete Sunday” Or in English, “Rejoice!” It is to remind ourselves that we are preparing for the very joyful occasion of the birth of Jesus, where we light the rose candle, and the priest may wear rose vestments.

The common theme of the day’s scripture readings is one of joy and gratitude:

Isaiah: “I rejoice heartily in my Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul.”

Paul: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”

And it is the joy of the coming Messiah that draws John from the desert.

The readings show us that Gratitude flows from God's presence. More gratitude will not come from more acquisitions, but from more awareness of God's presence and God's goodness.

I put the cards you filled out that first week in Advent on the altar today, as an offering of our gratitude to God. I read over them and found it interesting that none thanked God for the car or the latest gadgets or money. Most gave thanks for family, faith and wellbeing. And some were asking for prayers.

I believe that you answered in this way because most of you perceive God in your lives. What I would like to do is outline how one may recognize or not, how we receive God in our lives that leads to a grace filled life.

Our lives are filled with benefits from God. Unfortunately, we are sometimes blind to this. As John the Baptist said, “there is one among you whom you do not recognize...”

Perhaps the biggest obstacle preventing us from recognizing God’s goodness in our midst, is the temptation to act as though we were “god” (with a small “g”) to act as though we are in control of our lives, to act as if our security, our decisions, and our very destiny were all in our own hands!

So, the *first step* for a grace filled life is to realize there is a God and it is not me.

Gratitude always involves a disposition of humility. If I believe I am owed something, I will not be thankful for it because I think I’m entitled to it.

If you just give me a car for no reason at all, I’ll be overwhelmed with gratitude. I’ll say, "Thank you! I can’t believe how good you are to me." But if I pay the fair market value for the car, when you hand me the keys, I would say, "That's fine. Okay," but I won't say, "Thank you for this incredible gift. I'm overwhelmed," because I bought it. I'm owed it.

The problem is when we begin to think of them in the same way – meaning the second example. The more we think we’re entitled to, the less we will be grateful for it. We wonder, “Why do people who keep getting more and more, show less and less gratitude?” The bigger our sense of entitlement, the smaller our sense of gratitude.

The Bible's word for ingratitude is grumbling. Have you ever heard of a church person grumbling? You can be lured away from God by grumbling quicker than almost anything else.

When I am grumpy, I become selfish, ignoring all the blessing coming my way. To be grateful, we must believe not just that benefits are coming our way, but that they don't come at random or by accident. They come from somebody. And that somebody is God, our benefactor, who always has good intentions towards us.

As Mary said, (quoting Isaiah) “The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” She understood that all her blessings originated from God and she lived her life that way.

If I'm to be a grateful person, I must believe that about God. A good God exists, and God's always giving to us, but also understanding I am receiving something I did not earn, merit, or deserve. +As one put it, “The Eucharist is a gift, not a reward for good behavior.”

Lastly, gratitude arises even amidst imperfection: In particular, we are to bless God for people—all people. The life with God has a lot to do with people. We should thank God for people we get along with easily and perhaps for people we find frustrating.

Why am I to be thankful for frustrating people? Because they make us dig deeper in our prayer life. “Oh God, help me to love this person!” If we wait for perfect people and perfect circumstances to be grateful, I will have to wait a long time.

Life with God will help us learn to be grateful for imperfect people and difficult circumstances. +Consider this story of a young man whose early years were filled with death and sorrow. His mother dies in his childhood; his father and elder brother in his youth. Later, he wrote:

“At twenty I had already lost all the people I loved, and even those I might have loved, like my older sister who, they said, died six years before I was born.” Despite all this, and amid great turmoil in his country, he eventually became a priest and served well enough to be called in by his superior and told that his appointment as a new bishop was pending.

Someone wrote: “Half an hour after this conversation he arrived at the convent of the Grey Ursuline sisters. He asked the nun who opened the door where the chapel was and entered it without saying another word.

He strode quickly toward the tabernacle and sank to his knees in the front pew... When the nuns went to bed, he was still in the chapel. He continued praying for eight hours.” The priest was Karol Wojtyla, as we know him today, John Paul II. He understood the presence of God in his life and he lived always in gratitude to God.

Our job is not to try forcing ourselves to feel grateful. As John Paul showed us, gratitude is the byproduct of a spiritual reality, we can't make this up. As we train ourselves to live in this reality, our job is to place our minds in the presence of God, and to surrender our will. Then we will remember and pray, God, you're right here, and I don't carry the weight of the world on my shoulders.

And hopefully, when we come to the end of our lives, we can look back and say, “What a blessed and graced filled life I lived.”