

Thanks and No Thanks

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse

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Leopold Stokowski, one of the most innovative and talented conductors of the 20th century, spoke with an Eastern European accent, claimed to be of Polish decent and is said to have learned to play the violin his grandfather purchased for him in Poland. His biographer, Michael Holyrod discovered that the fact of the matter was that Stokowski was born in England, never knew his grandfather who did live in Poland and learned to play music on the piano. Why would such a man of talent create such a story to fit his name? As his biographer observed "whenever anyone of imagination is subject to biography, the light of his persona runs the risk of being extinguished" (from *The Soul's Code* by James Hillman).

It wasn't that Mr. Stokowski was ashamed of his life but rather that he believed his name required more than what his real life had to offer. In genius, it is said, the lines between imagination and reality blur. When asked near the end of his life why the incongruency, Mr. Stokowski replied with all his usual eloquence "I immensely thankful for what my parents gave me, but my heritage as a classic musician required more of a thanks than my life had allowed." Nice spin.

I have thought of Leopold Stokowski and the struggle between telling the truth and honoring his heritage. Perhaps some of us would have done the same, glossing over the past in favor of the better parts of our life.

This morning I want to speak of naming thanks and letting go of what we are no longer thankful for. Names as we all know are very powerful markers to the soul. When Jacob wrestled with his angel in the Hebrew Bible and came away with a wound, he asked the angel for his name. The angel would not tell him but he gave Jacob a new name after the struggle, "Israel" meaning with God. A name tells the world who you are and indicates what you are about. This is especially true of celebrities. Look at any rock star; if they don't change their past, like Stokowski, they change their name like, Madonna, Sid Vicious, Eminem, Rodney Dangerfield. All of this indicates that some of us are not thankful for our past. Or we have a conflicted relationship about that past.

I am thankful for the rich bookish world and academic grounding of my heritage, but not so thankful for its cool emotional distance. Others are thankful for wealth, others for love. But my point here is that your name, like your past represents a part of you and in some way we can all be thankful for what it has given us. I often say that no experience goes

unlearned. There are those around us who have suffered enormously. I know of one woman who had been abused by her family, married twice and divorced by the time she was 19. She had had 4 different last names. When I met her she had chosen her own name from a novel and went to the courthouse to make it hers. Despite her hard past she still gave thanks though for the lessons she learned. She was a tremendous human being, kind, caring, a good judge of character and had the life experience to relate to almost anyone. It was as if in choosing her own name and leaving all those other names behind her she had moved on to what her life had taught her and what she was truly thankful for. Thanks for the lessons of life, she said, but no thanks for those markers to the past that were so painful.

In the story of Jacob, the angel, a being of equal strength wrestles with the Jacob the man, a man who had cheated his brother out of his inheritance and who had been cheated by his own father in law. I believe this angel was his own conscience. And his dark night of the soul led Jacob to realize that he needed to face up to his failures and learn from them. Soon afterward Jacob would be reconciled with his brother. And Jacob would be thankful for his encounter with the angel, a thanks that left him, not only with a limp but a new name as well. No thanks for my cheating past implied Jacob, but thanks for the lesson that made me a whole person, the wound only a reminder of what I had once been. How many of us carry such a wound? How many are in the least bit thankful of that wound?

Is it possible to give thanks for the lessons life has given us? We give thanks for the people who are there for us when we need them. But can we give thanks for what was difficult for us. No thanks for the abuse or for the pain, to be sure, but perhaps we can give thanks for how those experiences changed us.

As life changes around us we need to be ready to not only name what was good but also give thanks for what life teaches us. This is one of the other great touchstones of hope: taking stock of what we have and offer thanks for what we have learned. Thanksgiving is more than just counting our blessings. Thanksgiving is about naming what has been - good or bad - and giving thanks for what is and is no longer in our lives. If I look around at this church, I am incredibly thankful for this beautiful church. I am thankful for all of you. I am thankful that we are now able to welcome all kinds of people and groups in to be with us. I am thankful for the legitimacy your presence in the community gives our ministry. Like the interfaith service last Tuesday at Temple Beth El, I see us growing into ever widening communities of faith and understanding. I am thankful for our hardworking volunteers, for this incredible staff, for your financial gifts that allow us to

continually expand our ministry. I am thankful for the care we show the world such as in our Guest at Your Table program. I give thanks for my health and my family and my abilities. Conversely, I say no thanks to bigotry, exclusion, meanness and hatred. I say no thanks to my shortcomings, my tendency to assume too much, or to become defensive too easily.

You might try this at home. In our house we give thanks and no thanks as part of our thanksgiving ritual. Thanks and no thanks. I have wrestled with my angels and though my name is common, it speaks more deeply to who I am and still want to become: as a father, husband, grandfather and minister. It speaks to what I still have to do; to live long, to support those I love and to grow our free faith so that more and more people might know its loving message. In this season of thanksgiving, name those thanks and no thanks. It could very well be a touchstone of hope in your life. We will all die uncompleted, I guarantee it. But in the striving for the better, starting with naming our thanks, we become more of what we are meant to be. Naming thanks is the first step. The first step in any recovery is naming who we are and what we want, "Hi I am John and I am a (fill in the blank). That honest naming is in itself a thanksgiving. What do you have to be thankful for? Or what not? What about yourself are you naming thanks?

Leopold Stokowski despite his brilliance, failed to give thanks for all that he was. Not just his heritage but his reality too. As we grow together in the congregation we are becoming and have become; the children and adults who come every Sunday, the work we are starting to do in the community, the meals we share, the care we give, the music we love, the dance we do, let us be thankful that this place is here at all. And that it will be here for generations to come, for the next 50 years.

At the end of the day, I often take a quiet moment before falling asleep to give thanks for what this has brought. Not everyday to be sure. But most days, as any of us might do, I commend this practice of daily thanksgiving, naming the thanks and, yes, remembering the struggles, the demons of doubt, the troubles, the sense of worth, the fears and the sorrows, name them as well. Because naming those thanks gives being to them as angels of hope for what we have to look forward to. Angels of thanks and hope and mercy and resolve which remind us that tomorrow is another day, another chance, another time to move towards being what we are meant to become. May our blessings endure and our struggles diminish. Amen.

