

Be Like Millie.

By David Lopez, Director of Stewardship/Parish Administrator

Every day, I start my day by asking God to let me be more like Millie.

Millie is the most grateful lady I know. She doesn't worry about what happened yesterday, or freak out about what might happen tomorrow. She's completely free with her emotions, always excited to see people, and invariably happy with whatever life throws her at the moment. Millie lives—most gratefully—in the moment. This is Millie.

She's taught me how important it is find the things in life for which we can be grateful. And to overlook the other things.

I'm not ashamed to tell you that gratitude is not a state of mind that came easy to me. It still doesn't. I don't really have what one would call "a sunny disposition."

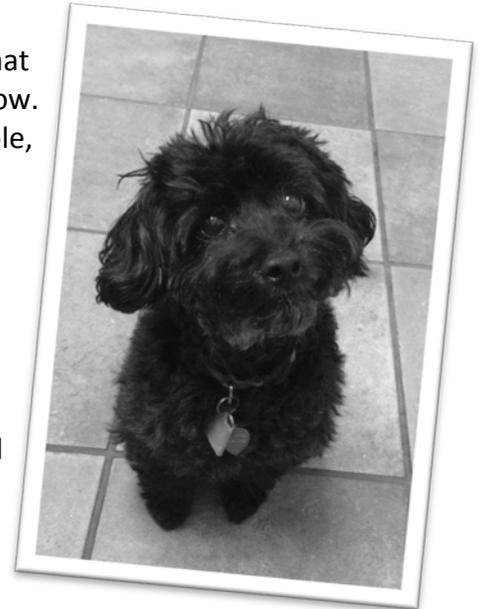
But I've learned that gratitude is foundational in our role as followers of Christ. And, for me, it's taken a journey down some painful roads to learn this important lesson. At the risk of sharing too much, let me tell you how I got here. I'm hoping a personal story of gratitude – complete with pictures - will be more interesting than just a purely theological discussion.

I've said this before, but I was a fairly "casual Catholic" for most of my life. I mean, Kathy and I went to Mass—most Sundays, if we didn't have something better to do; we gave "what we could" in the collection which was our polite way of saying "very little"... but my relationship with God was intentionally distant.

For the first 40 years of my life, I didn't put much effort into the relationship. I took things for granted; I believed in that American individualism that says "I can do it all myself" – and I figured if God had something to tell me, He'd let me know.

So He did. In fact, I remember the exact date, time and location.

Before I came to work at HT, I had a career in politics. I worked most of the time in Washington, DC. Kathy and the kids lived here and, I boarded a United airlines flight to DC about 30 weeks a year. If my goal was a great family life, my career path had turned into a recipe for disaster. On the other hand, if my goal was a self-centered, self-important, ungrateful life of isolation, it was a winning strategy. Let me put it in simple terms: *if you think I'm a jerk now, be grateful you didn't know me then.*



God decided he had had enough in May of 2003. That's when He decided that, one way or another, He was going to have a relationship with me ... and He was going to start teaching me that I had an abundance in my life for which I should be grateful...starting with Him.

His first lesson for me was a crash course in humility ... not humility in the "aw, shucks, I'm not worth anything" kind of way, but humility where I finally began to see -- and reach -- beyond me.

He taught me -- sometimes with what seemed like a 2x4 -- exactly what Sirach and Paul caution in the 1st two readings today: we disregard following God's wisdom and will at our own peril. We have two choices in life: think we can do it all on our own, or gratefully lose our own lives and surrender to His will.

This was tough for me. But I learned to be grateful that God cared enough about me to shake things up in my life and to arouse a sleepy heart.

This journey toward gratitude eventually led me to Holy Trinity. I always say I was the least likely person ever to work at a church, but apparently that's what God had in mind, as He led me up this hill fourteen years ago -- first as a parishioner, then as part of the staff.

As I started working at Holy Trinity, I felt I was finally doing something that mattered with my life. I was really overjoyed with the work I got to do here ... and then, as happens in life, the bottom just gave way.

On the day after Thanksgiving -- *ironically, the day after my family had offered our gratitude to God for seeing us through a year of enormous changes and life-altering decisions* -- I got an email telling me that the news was reporting that the government had targeted a half dozen members of Congress as part of a growing lobbying scandal. It was a complete surprise to me that the man I had worked for for 20 years was one of those targeted.

Life immediately changed after that. And not in a good way. It wasn't that I had thought I had done something wrong -- I knew I hadn't. But that didn't matter. When the government, with an unlimited, no-expense-spared legal team looks at every email you've written in ten years, every form you've ever filed, every public statement you've ever made ... and, 1-by-1, you see 20 people prosecuted and convicted, you become convinced your future involves handcuffs not Hallelujahs. *Parenthetically*, anyone here ever been part of a federal investigation? It's kind of like having a colonoscopy and root canal at the same time ... without the anesthesia.

I have no shame saying it was a scary, unsettled time. There were days when it was easier to stay in bed, covers pulled up over the head. But whenever it grew really dark and overwhelming, that's when God's grace burst in ... whether it friends who just listened or took me out for a change-of-pace evening or even my wife who, as I wallowed in pity, would bring me back to reality by saying "yeah, yeah, you're a big crime boss ... now take out the garbage."

For five long years this dragged on. I kept waiting in suspense for the other shoe to drop. And it never did. What roared with thunder for five years ended with a wimper. No fanfare, no charges, no fines, no pronouncements. Just a severely bruised ego.

Some will ask why I'm dredging up an experience is probably best forgotten. An experience that left me depressed, embarrassed – and something I rarely talk about.

But the answer is simple: for good or bad, it makes up the tapestry of my life, and just as Scripture promises, God used it to teach me of his unfailing love. Of his constant provision for us as his children. He taught me to not worry about yesterday or tomorrow, but to look at what he's provided today and to focus on being grateful for it. Really to live like Millie does.



During this same time, as our family battled the government and I battled for my reputation, there's another person who taught me to be grateful in the most surprising way possible. It's this young man: Andrew, our middle son.

Now let me qualify that I asked Andrew if I could talk about him today since this was his story, and his response surprised me, especially because he's only 23 years old, but he said "Dad, it's as much your story as it is mine. And telling it just might help someone who's hurting."

When Andrew was young, he struggled with school. Doctors gave us every possible diagnosis imaginable: ADHD, bipolar, dyslexia, even just willful defiance and laziness. We never could get to the bottom of it, and it really didn't matter, because in his teen years, Andrew decided the solution for what ailed him was to just medicate himself. At 14, he began an 8-year romance with drugs. To say that this broke his parents' heart is an understatement.

Every time we thought things couldn't get worse, they did. Multiple rehabs shattered our savings; every time the phone rang, my heart stopped, as I waited for the day when a voice on the other end of the phone would say "Mr. Lopez, I have some bad news for you ..."

It was hard to find anything for which to be grateful in the life we were living during this time. In fact, it was a lot easier to be pretty angry with a God who would let this happen.

But during this 8 year span, just when things seemed the darkest, God would again shine light into our lives. He often drew me to the lyrics from the Leonard Cohen song "Anthem": *"There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."*

My son, whom I loved so much, was cracked...but no more than the rest of us are, myself included. But God taught Kathy and me that there was much to rejoice in, much to be grateful for in those cracks ... because the cracks let in the light of Christ, to both Andrew's life and to ours.

The same reasons that likely led him down this path – those cracks of being sensitive and compassionate, and wanting desperately to measure up, and caring that he had disappointed us – were the cracks that reminded us why we loved him so much in the first place. Why we were grateful he was our son.

Eventually we found enormous gratitude in this struggle. We found gratitude when Andrew refused to give up on himself. ...when someone in whom we had confided assured us they were praying for us ... when someone came into Andrew's life to support him and love him when his parents found it hard to even like him.

We found gratitude because we learned to look for God's grace in the day's events. We were determined to find something good that happened each day, to recognize God's loving hand in it, and to purposely express gratitude for it. That's truly what kept us going ... looking for something, anything, with which we could connect to God in gratitude.

With great thanks to God, Andrew is now nearly a year into a sober life, taking college classes, and working 40 hours a week. He's a different young man from a few years ago. He has a huge heart and is grateful to God for watching over him the past eight years. (He's even going with us to Haiti next weekend!)

I always say there is no one who taught me more in my life than Andrew. He taught me a lot, but perhaps more than anything he helped me value the biblical principle that there is always something for which we can – and should – be grateful.

So what does "living gratefully" mean?

It doesn't mean we live unrealistically, like some Disney character who lives in a world where everything is always blue skies and chirping birds.

Lousy things happen in life; *lousy is unavoidable*. We'll all experienced lousy. And it's nothing new; the Bible is replete with stories of trials and suffering and challenges.

But the Bible is equally filled with an assurance that God is with us in those same trials and suffering and challenges. That assurance comes through grace. Grace is the free and undeserved gift of God that allows us to respond to His call to be disciples of Christ. Grace is the very character of God's nature, and it overflows in acts of mercy, compassion and endless giving. It's what allows us to know with certainty that God always walks with us ... wanting the best for us ... if we will just cooperate. It's exactly this cooperation in love that Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel.

Gratitude then is our natural response to God's grace. It's our response to all the undeserved blessings He provides us. And our gratitude then leads to giving, because giving is the way we express our gratitude to God – by sharing the goodness that He has given to us.

But I realize, for many of us, gratitude may not be a natural feeling. I'm convinced gratitude needs to become a habit. Somewhere along the way in my life, I learned I had to willfully focus my thoughts to what is good ... not just for the sake of a cheery disposition, but because forcing myself to focus on gratitude strengthens my relationship with God, and forces me to focus on the goodness He provides.

How often do we wander through our days, not looking for the ways God chooses to bless us? Not looking for His grace? Not looking for God, active in our lives?

If we don't look, we're likely not going to see it. We're not going to experience the goodness.

So every day now, I make myself start the day with five minutes of gratitude. Early in the morning, I start by thanking God for whatever comes to mind as things I'm grateful for. Starting this way changes my attitude, my demeanor ... it changes me because, as someone said, "a thankful heart shifts the gravity of its thoughts from ME to THEE."

And now, I've learned to end my day in much the same way. As I put my head on the pillow each night, I thank God for three things from that day for which I am grateful. It might be something as life-changing as God healing someone from an illness or something as seemingly insignificant as just having a good laugh with a co-worker.

Finding – and naming – three things for which I am grateful for is my way of saying to God "I see you; I feel you at work in my life." *Because there is always something for which we can be grateful.*

As our parish begins our annual Stewardship Renewal – as we all take inventory of how God has blessed us and how we can honor Him with how we share those blessings – we invite our entire parish (adults and kids alike) to commit to cultivating gratitude by committing to our "28 Day Challenge of Extraordinary Gratitude & Giving."



As you leave today, we've got a gift for you: a journal where you can write down three things for which you are grateful, each day for 28 days.

But don't stop at just receiving God's goodness. Take it one step further, and search for at least one way in which you brought goodness to someone else that day. Maybe you listened when your spouse really needed it, or you held the door open for someone, or you reached out to a friend or colleague to say "I'm sorry." How did you extend grace to someone, just like God so lovingly extends it to you?

And to get you in the habit of making time to write in your journal, in the narthex, we also have a mug for everyone on which is printed "Start the Day with 5 Minutes of Gratitude." Sip your

coffee or hot chocolate, and tell God why you're grateful. Not asking for 30 minutes of your busy life; just asking for 5. Will you commit to just 5 minutes of your life for the next 28 days?

And then watch how God changes your life. I can promise you, if you'll take the chance that all this works, at the end of 28 days, you'll be happier, more forgiving, more accepting ... it will change the way you think about life.

But most importantly, you'll experience your relationship with God in a new way. You'll see with fresh eyes exactly how his Grace is showered upon you, and, in sharing that grace, how you can be grace for others.

And, if all that doesn't entice you, there's always the reason we started with – maybe the best reason of all: you too can be like Millie.