

One day, a husband and wife team walked into a church that I served in the past. They moved from another town, and they decided to worship with the United Methodists. They sold their house elsewhere, and bought a newly-built one in a gated community in town. Their daughter's family lived in the next town. They were now comfortably retired.

I got to know the man of the house, mainly through the story he told. You see, he was a self-made man. He immigrated to the U.S. with virtually no money. He served in the Army, he worked hard at many different jobs, he saved money, and he is now comfortably retired. I did not at first, but later noticed that he tirelessly told everyone the same story about his success. At one occasion, I glanced at his wife, and I could tell, she was visibly in discomfort. Apparently, she heard the story so many times, that it made her ill at ease, whenever her husband started to brag about himself.

I was reminded of this man, as I was reading the book by Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, the book that we have been reading in the Sunday morning adult class. In one of the chapters, Borg sharply points out something that any self-made man might find offensive, and I quote:

Of course, individual responsibility matters, but none of us is really self-made. We are also the product of many factors beyond our control. These include genetic inheritance, affecting both health and intelligence; the family into which we're born and our upbringing; the quality of education we receive; and a whole host of "accidents" along life's way—good breaks and bad breaks. To think we are primarily the product of our own individual effort is to ignore the web of relationships and circumstances that shape our lives (p.128).

If this is true, then, there are things that have been given to us, done to us, without our input. Some millionaires might have been lucky people who held on to the farm land until one day the

value of the property soared, when the population grew; or they could be some who happened to unload their stocks just before the market crashed. Or, some might deserve the dubious recognition of their personal input: they might have been those who exploited their workers and defrauded their investors.

The point is: no one is 100% self-made. There are things, circumstances, opportunities, people, and other factors that helped the person achieve what he or she wanted, to become who he or she is now. There are unseen factors that helped a person become successful. It takes discerning eyes to notice stuff like this. If one managed to discern how much was given to him or herself, then in the moment of spiritual enlightenment the individual would raise this question: "Why am I this blessed, while others must toil and sweat and suffer and die?"

Not long after the Labor Day, I walked into one of the evil stores that I patronize. You cannot walk out of this store, without going over \$100. You might have only wanted to get chicken, but that chicken would end up costing \$100 plus—along with other things that you did not know you needed.

The store had already put up the full merchandise for the Christmas. I was just surprised to be reminded of the Christmas that early. Boxes of cards, gift wrappers, the tree ornaments, and crèche lined up the sides of the aisle. A fake fir tree proudly announced with the artificial lights the merry season of imminent retail heaven. But it was only September! Somehow, Christmas arrived less than 2 weeks after the Labor Day.

That meant that the spirit of Thanksgiving had entirely disappeared from the retailers' minds nowadays. Thanksgiving survives only on its commercial value, obviously. Is it good or bad, I do not know. But along

with the disappearance of the visible recognition of Thanksgiving season, I am afraid something unseen has been tossed along with it.

No, I am not talking about the pilgrims and Indians feasting on turkeys. I am not talking about getting together with the family and friends. I am not talking about trying to remember what to be thankful for, just before people gorge themselves. I am talking about something that occupies our sub-consciousness, an attitude that we rarely notice that we have. That attitude is something no one can force upon others. It comes either naturally, or had to be acquired by one's self. That is known as the attitude of thankfulness.

Borg puts it this way in his book:

An open heart and gratitude go together. We can feel this in our bodies. In the moments in my life when I have been most grateful, I have felt a swelling, almost a bursting in my chest (p.162).

Borg also puts it in another way, borrowing from the metaphor of "thin places" in Celtic Christianity. To paraphrase what he said, thin places are where two different realms of being come together, intermingling with one another.

Thin place is where the divine and the human make a distinct contact. It could be geographical places, such as the locations of pilgrimage, Jerusalem for the Christians, Mecca for the Muslims. Or, it could be anywhere one's heart opens. It could be the wilderness where one's senses are filled with awe. It could be the Grand Canyon. Or, it could be an unsullied, deserted beach you walk on. Or, it could be arts--music, poetry, literature, etc. Or, it could be even people with whom you come in contact with—people who inspire us in times of bleak despair, for example.

Borrowing from Borg, this attitude of thankfulness is best described by the metaphor, "thin places." This attitude of

thankfulness resides in the sub-consciousness of a person, and then it is brought up momentarily into the consciousness, and thus made visible to our perception. We experience it as being present in the "thin place."

This thin place is not something that you recall from your memory. If you did recall, then, it is but a memory of the past. A memory itself lacks that awesome, heart-felt, soul-moving power. A memory of the past, however, could lead you into a thin place.

A thin place happens to you suddenly, and you are not prepared for it at all, and you cannot make an appointment for it. You can only realize it when you have suddenly stepped into the thin place.

There was one person who was in the middle of the thin place, but failed to notice it. Maybe it was so, because it was his everyday place. He was in the presence of a great man, but he never suspected it. All he

wanted to know was where he was the king of the Jews, as others accused him of being. To him Jesus replied: "My kingdom is not from this world."

We could experience his kingdom while we are in this world, but it is not of this world. It is something that is wholly other. To borrow from the aforementioned metaphor, the kingdom of God is one of the thin places. That is where the human beings and God mingle together. One might say that the kingdom of God is the quintessential place of all thin places.

I have experienced a sliver of a thin place yesterday, while reading the newspaper. A single mom of three kids, ages 10, 8, and 6, who lives in El Sobrante, saw her Toyota Corolla burst into flames. It was torched by an arsonist who has destroyed more than 20 cars over the period. She now could not go to work, or take her kids to school.

Then a daycare operator in Oakland heard about the plight. She remembered, when she herself was a single mom of three 20 years ago, who could not afford the insurance and lost her car to an engine fire. As the woman recalled her past memory, it moved her into a thin place as she recalled it: she bought a used Chevy Impala, and presented it to the distraught single mom.

The grateful single mom said, "I can't believe that in this world, we still have angels, because she is an angel." That is a grateful heart. That is an open heart. The daycare operator became a thin place for the single mom.

That is how it is like to be in the kingdom that is not from this world. Yet this kingdom is found in this world. It is invisible to the regular eyes. But it stands out to the eyes of the open heart. The grateful heart can see the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is notoriously elusive to the eyes of the self-made men and women.

But it appears as if a faint mirage, as those men and women begin to realize the factors that helped them become "self-made." It comes into view distinctively, however, as they begin to ponder: "Why am I this blessed, while others toil and sweat and suffer and die?" That is the moment when our hearts open, and that is the moment when we are about to step into the thin place.

Thanksgiving is not a season that comes and goes, as people celebrate with the family and friends. It is not sitting around the table and trying to recall what you are grateful for. It certainly is not Black Friday.

Thanksgiving is a sub-conscious attitude that dwells in your soul. Thanksgiving is a thin place. Thanksgiving is found in the kingdom of God.