

“One Thousand Gifts” Anne Grossman, SHPC Feb. 12, 2012

Do you remember that greeting card that says “A friend is someone who knows you and loves you anyway”? I have a village of those friends.

Two of them, Judie and Sally have shared my life for 35 years. Our friendship began with a common thread of friends, kids and church membership. It has strengthened through the years because we have walked with each other through personal trials and crises. Not always understanding the other’s pain (you simply don’t if you haven’t experienced it), we would support each other with listening, non-judgment and prayer. This prayer was always one of thanks. We knew, but had to remind ourselves that He was right there with us. God would hold us, carry us and guide us through our dark times.

We don’t live in the same town anymore but we stay in close contact... always by phone, sometimes by email and when we can with a visit. We think nothing of picking up a book for the other and sending it on “just because” .

We had a mini reunion in VA Beach last fall. Sally gave Judie and me a book called “one thousand gifts”. She had seen it in a bookstore. She wasn’t sure why, but she was drawn to it. Drawn to it enough to buy one for herself and one for each of us. This book is beautifully written by Ann Voskamp. The core message is that the joy she was seeking...the Holy joy...could be found by giving thanks in everyday things.

It was perfect timing for me. I was reeling from the Penn State scandal feeling a pain that surprised me with its intensity. I was confused, angry, let down and bewildered by what I was hearing as the week unfolded. You see, I am a Penn Stater...blue and white through and through. I couldn’t come to grips that my University had broken my trust...betrayed me in so many ways. How could information that had gone through all the right channels. ...followed the protocols...be silenced by those at the top? How could this witnessed abuse of a child be held secret...for years?

The firing of Joe Paterno, the head football coach, came four days after the scandal became public. He was fired for “not doing enough” The board of trustees acknowledged he had done the right thing...followed the protocol set before him...but still was fired for “not doing enough”.. He was let go so that the power of the media would be silenced. He was a lightning rod to the school and its shame. It may have had to be done for healing to begin.... but it was done in a very cowardly way. He got a phone call at 9 at night telling him he had been relieved of his duties.

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After 61 years of devoting his life to Penn State in both football and academics he was let go with a phone call. No one on the board had the decency or courage to go to his house with the message.

My pain intensified. It led to the realization that I was experiencing first hand the bigger picture of corporate greed. In this case it was a university. Penn State sought only to protect its image and funding by keeping secrets. There it was again...the sharp stabbing pain of betrayal... and this pain was deep because I realized I was but one of thousands feeling this. How could a school I knew, loved and revered turn its backs on young boys? These boys had learned at a very early age not to trust.... that trust brings pain and shame.

I loved Penn State from the first time I saw it. Its nickname is Happy Valley. For me it was a magical place of energy, safety and security. It is located in the midst of beautiful mountains in central Pennsylvania and yes it has the bluest sky ever. As an undergrad walking across campus each day I soaked in the sense that I belonged here. I felt alive with a joy I find difficult to explain...God's country some would say. Surely for me there was a presence of God I had not before experienced. It was an energy giving and spirit-filling place. I grew here... I challenged my mind with science and math. I learned how to step out socially in the safety of sorority mixers. And I relished the PE requirements. I loved learning and trying new sports that were unavailable in my small town high school. One of my favorite things was that I could take the 20 minute walk across campus each day and see new faces.... people I didn't know...but were sharing my experience of the adventure.

I stopped by for a campus visit about 18 months ago. I ate at the corner room, got ice cream at the new creamery, and happily felt like I was one of the many students. As I walked across campus I thought that the only way one might recognize I was not a student would be by the fact that I carried a purse instead of a backpack. I even checked out the new retirement communities....and thought it might be the perfect place to spend the golden years. Where else would there be such a core of people sharing what we all had felt by living in the shadows of a University we knew and loved?

So what does betrayal have to do with a book called “One Thousand Gifts?”. I began reading it with mild interest not finding too much common ground to share with the author. Ann Voskamp was haunted by nightmares from a childhood trauma. As a young girl she had seen her

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younger sister die in a farm accident. Her mother was unable to cope with the loss. Her own relationship with her mother was never the same again.

Ann was seeking the goal of her fullest life... **joy**. Hers was a life filled with the never-ending routine that living on a farm and homeschooling six children brings. How do you experience joy when there is so much other stuff clouding vision? She wrestles with this when during her daily bible reading she was struck by the image of Jesus at the last supper. Jesus giving thanks for bread and wine just hours before his betrayal and death...both of which he knew was coming. She pulled out books on the words giving thanks and discovered that in original Greek this word is Eucharisteo. I quote her as she says:

“the root word of eucharisteo is *charis*, meaning “grace.” Jesus took the bread and saw it as grace and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be gift and gave thanks. But there is more, and I read it. Eucharisteo, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, *charis*. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word *chara*, meaning “joy.”

Is the height of my *chara* joy dependent on the depths of my eucharisteo thanks? So then as long as thanks is possible...I think this through. As long as thanks is possible, then joy is always possible. Joy is always possible. Whenever, meaning - now; wherever, meaning - here. The holy grail of joy is not in some exotic location or some emotional mountain peak experience. The joy wonder could be here! Here, in the messy, piercing ache of now, joy might be unbelievably possible! “

Her book goes on with practical and poetic ways for those of us to find our own joy. It is rooted in beginning with “one thousand gifts”....keeping a journal and writing down 1000 things as they come into your life that you are thankful for...no matter what is going on in your life right at the moment.

That was it I realized.... the betrayal I was experiencing that caused such deep pain was not the first and won't be the last time I experience this feeling. But suddenly the connection of Jesus' betrayal being part of abundant life became a radically different idea for me. Jesus knew about this betrayal beforehand and he knew his time on earth was limited. And yet..... He gave thanks for the daily bread and wine of the Passover Supper. Thanks for God with Him, right there in the upper room...thanks that God would be with him through his darkest hours and then joyfully through all eternity. Jesus came to bring us abundant life...He taught

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through example and this might be one of the most important ones for me. Thanks for all the ways I see and experience God in everyday life.

The Penn State scandal may not have been the source of extreme pain for you. ...but each of us.....each one of us.....has been touched by betrayal. Betrayal comes in many forms. The common denominator is that betrayal is **always** is the breaking of a trust.

- Trust is broken when you share a confidence with a friend only to find out later that your information was shared without permission. You learn to keep things inside so nobody will know your pain or make judgments.
- Trust is broken when investments are lost by a greedy financier who gets rich in a ponzi scheme or by an industry that goes bankrupt with your retirement accounts. You learn to hide what is left to keep it safe. You learn to take no risks.
- Trust is broken when **anyone** verbally, emotionally or physically abuses another person for any reason. This abused person learns to stay in the shadows, or self medicates with food, drink, sex or drugs just to take away the pain.
- Trust is broken when a husband has an affair. The wife is left putting the brokenness of her self-esteem back together. She has to wash off the shame of feeling she will never measure up to the other woman's desirability. She feels unlovable. She does not share this story easily. Her road to healing is long and lonely.
- Trust is broken when a body that is well taken care of for years... exercised, nourished and rested suddenly lets loose a few wildly multiplying cells and the life changing diagnosis of “cancer” is given

Betrayal....if you haven't personally experienced it, you have sat with a friend or family member who has. As the story comes out it is one of anger at the betrayer for permanently altering a life. The loss of trust is just that...a loss and just like dying, the five stages of grief have to be traversed.

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Ask...and then really listen to someone who has had a cancer diagnosis. I remember being really mad at my body for not resisting the enemy. My first few visits to the doctors found me with high blood pressure. I would assure each one it was white coat syndrome but I knew it was anger. I resented the paperwork, the myriad of appointments, and the ever-increasing size of my medical file. It didn't matter that the cancer it had been caught early...that my long-term prognosis was good...what mattered was that I was now and will always be a cancer survivor. My body had let me down.

My cancer taught me that there really isn't much in my life over which I have control. Yes I had been good about giving God my spirit...but as I discovered.... not my body. I have been learning to let go of that which was never mine in the first place. I question God about this and He teaches me gently to trust Him...for He has walked in my shoes and is with me every step of the way now.

Ann Voskamp helps.... she shares her journey of finding her answers through the message of Jesus who lives a life of thanks...of eucharisteo....of giving thanks first:

Before the feeding of the thousands
Before the healing of Jairus' child
Before he was betrayed

Thanks first...joy second.

I am not a theologian by any means, but I am a person who seeks Jesus. My path to him doesn't come by scholarly pursuit but rather by being more aware of His presence in my life. I have begun writing my list of 1000 gifts. They don't look like Ann's list at all....they are not as poetic or creative but that is OK...they are mine. The more I write...the more I seek to find... and then the realization that I see, hear, taste and feel more closely the presence of God. During my days of pain of betrayal when anger was my closest friend it was not God that had moved away but I.

As I allow Him to minister to my pain... He heals. It is one sunrise after another, one bird singing after another, one dog walk after another ... things that have been there but I have failed to notice.... the constancy of the sun rise, the melody in the music of the birds, and the joy of my dog Parker thinking this walk is the “best one ever”. I find I slowly unclench my fists of control and say more often and more freely the prayer “your

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will, not mine”. I can feel the layers of years of hurt and pain releasing as I come to know that I will always be able to trust Jesus. He knows betrayal and He knows God is always with him.... and He knows “Holy Joy.’

The mess at Penn State isn’t going away any day soon. This once proud University will have to humble itself and begin to put its priorities in order. It will have to be less about football and image and more about people. It will take a board of trustees, and a president, who are willing to expose the lies and cover-up. Those at the top will then have to find the ways to empower all staff, faculty and students to know that there is a clear path to take when and if one is ever confronted with abuse of a child again..

My cancer? ...well I have worked through the initial anger and am using my experience to be a better facilitator in the Kelly Weinberg foundation. I meet with a small group of cancer survivors weekly. If you were sitting outside the door you would hear more laughter than tears for it is a healing group, not a grieving group. God is definitely sitting on the chairs with us and we give thanks each week for His presence in our lives. I have discovered from others in the group that cancer can ravage the body but not the spirit. I learn from them each week.

My greatest joy comes in relationship connections. The Holy joy I seek is coming...I can feel it bubbling below the surface for it is in my relationship with God. I am cultivating this with my list of thanksgivings, which will not stop at 1000. I will not only be able to see him in all things. I will be able to trust him in all things. I will not have to move away during times of trouble. I will be able to let him hold me, carry me and lead me through the darkness. Happy Valley isn’t a place I have to move to. Happy Valley is wherever I am when I am in God.

Thank you Ann Voskamp for this wonderful book. Thank you Judie and Sally for walking with me for 35 years and thank you Jesus for leading by example.... for giving thanks.....for eucharisteo.

Amen