

Be Thankful, Not Proud!

The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” There is something profoundly right about giving thanks. Thanks-giving is the basic posture of the religious life. By the same token, the most grievous disposition of the religious person is pride. For Christians, it is chief among the mortal sins.

To give thanks is to recognize and acknowledge that all we have, and all we are, comes to us as gift, as boon or blessing. Life itself is the most basic of gifts. We had nothing to do with our coming into being. None of us can make the sun rise. Sleep, love, and good digestion come to us as blessings. We can make ourselves unhealthy, but what health we have is given to us. All that makes life worth living is ultimately a gift. We give thanks because we know we are recipients of what we have not earned, and do not necessarily deserve.

Pride, by contrast, is a form of self-exaltation. It is a denial of the basic givenness of life!

A couple have a baby. One hopes they are thrilled, overjoyed, profoundly thankful! Often they are said to be “proud.” What does pride have to do with it? Their ability to conceive and give birth is hardly reason to boast. They did not make their child. Their child is no credit to them. The child comes as a gift and, one hopes, as a blessing. Call them happy, but please don’t call them proud!

People claim to be proud to be Americans, or they are proud to be Hoosiers. What for? This pride is genuinely pernicious. Be happy, be thankful, but please do not be proud. It’s no reflection on you if you happen to have been born in this country. And if you immigrated here, you haven’t made this country what it is. Why should you be proud of something that has not been your doing in the first place?

Do not confuse pride with self-respect, or self-esteem. Pride is self-congratulatory. Pride is truly at odds with gratitude. The proud person is in no mood to acknowledge and receive what comes as gift. The autobiography of the proud person is titled: “Humility: How I Achieved It – in Three Volumes.” The autobiography of the humble and grateful person is titled “Being Lucky,” or simply, “Thanks.”

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