

Thanksgiving Sermon
November 23, 2008
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Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. I suppose that having been raised in the Christian tradition, Christmas should be. But like a lot of other Unitarians, I don't like to feel too bound by tradition, like to create my own, and enjoy a bit of heretical thinking now and then. So although I love Christmas, Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday.

Thanksgiving is more relaxed than Christmas. There's not all that pressure of the decorations, buying and wrapping gifts, mailing gifts, worrying if the gift is the right one. And there haven't been all those parties to go to ahead of time. For closet introverts like me, and other introverts, parties can be awfully tiring.

Thanksgiving is more laid back, with lots of fine food, laughter, good company, maybe a football game, and enjoying children of various ages. There's time to reflect on our blessings and all the things we have to be thankful for. And there's time to share those thoughts.

One of the things I'm grateful for is our religious ancestors, the 20,000 or so who settled in New England in the early 1600's. They had wanted to get out of England, where the law required them to attend boring and meaningless ritualistic services. Where the Church was authoritarian, and they had no voice in church governance or proceedings.

They were clever folks. In order to ensure that they had land, they formed the Massachusetts Bay Company and got a charter and grant from the king to settle and do business on land that had belonged to the throne. For years, when the English asked for reports from the company, and asked questions about their business, they delayed their responses because they were afraid of having their grant and charter revoked.

The settlers took their religious life and governance seriously. Before establishing the Dedham, Mass. Church, they spent at least a year in structured conversations about how they wanted to govern their church. These conversations probably took place all over New England, but the Dedham church is the only church whose records were preserved. People got together in various homes, and the host always began the conversation. After that, people spoke in turn. The rule was that there be no arguing, just discussion. They agreed that they must all listen to one another. And in that long process they finally resolved to form a covenantal polity, where in they emphasized the importance of mutual affection, self-governance, and that the laity would elect its leaders and its ministers. This was a **big deal**. No appointments. Minimal hierarchy. For that time, they created a new paradigm of religious practice and governance. Today, we call that system "congregational polity". Unitarians Universalists, Baptists, and a very few other Protestant denominations follow that system.

It is a system that our religious forefathers built on mutual affection, respect, trust and dedication to worshipping according to their own felt needs. It often took over a year to

decide to call a minister, because ministers usually stayed a lifetime. And so parishioners wanted to hear a potential minister preach over an extended period of time before deciding to call him to permanent ministry. These people took their religious life seriously, and took a lot of care to make certain that they avoided top-down authoritarian church governance like they had had in England.

We are indeed beholden to these thoughtful people. We can elect our own Search Committee, whom we trust to find us the best possible minister for our congregation. And you get to make the final choice, after a full week of meetings and gathering during which you all have opportunities to question your ministerial candidate and listen to the candidate preach. At this point, I kind of imagine that the Search Committee is nearing exhaustion. They have prepared an extensive book of information about the church, its history, the finances, membership, activities and programs. And they are reviewing the extensive information submitted by fifteen or more ministers who are interested in serving First Unitarian. I'll bet they will be glad when this year is over, and that they are glad they don't have to listen to interested pre-candidates preach for a year each before recommending a final candidate to you.

Our process isn't precisely the same as that of the early Pilgrims, but it builds on the thoughtful work they did to establish a democratic way of selecting and calling a minister and a model of church governance.

And so Thanksgiving seems to be an appropriate time to honor all those people who came over in tiny ships, to an unfamiliar, uncharted land and did the hard work for us as liberal religious people.

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday for lots of other reasons as well. I like pie. I like pecan pie. I like mince pie. I like pumpkin pie. I like sweet potato pie. Recently at a Thanksgiving gathering in Texas, we had three turkeys (two deep-fried), two green vegetables and nine pies. And for old-times sake, a fruit-filled Jello salad on iceberg lettuce, topped by homemade mayonnaise.

I love the laughter, the bets on whose children are going to call first (or last), the story-telling and silly jokes, and getting to know younger members of the family better. What they are studying in school, how they have fun, what music they enjoy. A distant cousin of mine has a band, and recently I learned that he is a rock star – truly. It's amazing.

But the best part of Thanksgiving is sitting around a fire and sharing what we feel most thankful for this year. Because I know this moment is in the Thanksgiving celebration family liturgy, I gear up for it and make a list, then struggle with trying to decide which I'm most thankful for. This year the top ones are not difficult. I'm thankful for the lives of three special people who died this last year – a cousin who nurtured and fussed over me all my life, a sailing pal who sang in Spanish and played the guitar, and a political pal who took care of me when I first moved to Washington. She died on November 13, quietly, in her sleep. We continuously talked politics and exclaimed in dismay over the way we thought Reagan, Nixon and the Bushes were ruining our country. I will miss all of them. I am thankful they were in my life.

And I'm thankful to simple things like good health, and good relationships with my wonderful children, and the privilege of living in this imperfect but perfectable country, this imperfect but perfectable world. Sometimes I wish that I believed some supernatural being could fix everything and make it all right. But I don't, and when all is said and done, I'm thankful that I and all of us have the opportunity to change the world, and to transform it into a more loving community.

I'm thankful for the challenge. And thankful for the privilege of serving you, which offers so many opportunities to all of us to make a difference. Can we make a difference? I say, "Yes, we can." Yes, we can.

I'm thankful for tennis, and bridge, and good friends. Music, dance, theater. Silly jokes. The Prairie Home Companion. Strong coffee, homegrown tomatoes. Afternoon naps. Poetry and books I don't want to put down. Language and nuance. The curiosity of children, and the soft skin of babies. Memories of adventures in this land and far-off lands. Waterfalls, trees, and a small vegetable garden. I'm thankful for the care and courtesies of people I meet every day, whether I know them or not. For the openness of this congregation. For the energies and commitment you show. For your generosity of spirit and generosity with finances. I'm thankful for the fact that you long ago hung that banner out front, and that it is visible from the Pope Paul Peace Garden. For the anti-torture effort, and for the care and concern you show for the community. I'm thankful Jim and the choir, Becky and the RE program, Jeffry, our sexton, the office staff and for all the dedicated leaders here who work continuously to support liberal religion and our voice in Baltimore.

I'm thankful for a mind that enables me to think in terms of possibilities as well as tradition. An imagination that sometimes gets me in trouble, but that leads to that wonderful question, "Why not?" And "What's the worst thing that could happen?" "Why not try it once and see what happens." I'm thankful for that occasionally mischievous mind that leads me down roads not previously traveled.

I'm thankful for my younger brother, who called me every day for over a month last summer after I had knee surgery. Who never fails to put family first in his support and generosity.

I'm thankful for blue skies and determined to keep them blue. For homemade fudge with pecans and tiny marshmallows in it. For hiking trails and lakes and camping spots that thoughtful people set aside for us.

I'm thankful for my parents, who literally lived and worked all their lives for me and my brother, to ensure that we had access to fine education, and that we learned little social skills like putting our napkins in our laps. And to say "Please", "Thank you", "Yes sir" and "Yes Ma'am" and to stand up and offer a chair when older people come in the room. They would surely smile down from heaven to hear me telling you this.

I imagine many of you are thankful for all sorts of things. I'm going to quiet for a little bit now, and invite you to speak out, tell us something or someone you are thankful for.

I'm thankful that my mother insisted we use the butter knife, but when I heard my son reminding **his** daughter to use the butter knife, I decided things had gone too far, and I said, "You know, Robert, there are lots of things that much more important than using the butter knife." We just smiled.

I'm thankful for cars and trains and planes and all the wonderful things that let us get around easier and see more of the world. I'm thankful for opportunities to explore the world, and always glad to come home. I'm thankful I have a home, and all too aware that many people don't.

I'm thankful for life and its many blessings and the love that we all share in many ways, with family, one another, and in the world. I'll be more thankful than ever when our world is more fair, when nobody is hungry or homeless, when everybody can have decent health care, when we conquer illness and diseases, and when every person in the world is filled with hope and encouragement, and filled with the energy to build and share lives of care and compassion. I'm thankful for that opportunity and challenge, and thankful that I know deep in my heart that we can. Yes, we can. We can do justice to those Pilgrims who paved the way for us. And we can pave the way for others. Yes, we can. Happy Thanksgiving.

Amen