

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
COMMUNITY CHURCH**

Park Forest, Illinois

Sunday, November 27, 2005



**LEARNING
(and REMEMBERING) TO SAY THANKS**

the Rev. Dr. Randolph W.B. Becker, Minister

READINGS

from *Hebrew Scripture, Governor Bradford*

Psalm 100:

Make a joyful noise unto the force of creation, all ye lands.
Serve creation with gladness: come before its presence with singing.
Know ye that the spirit of all is God: it is what hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are the people of creation, and the sheep of the creator's pasture.
Enter into the gates of all existence with thanksgiving, and into the courts of being with praise: be thankful unto all, and bless the name of creation.
For the Spirit of Life is good; mercy is everlasting; and truth endureth to all generations.

Psalm 140

Deliver me from the evil man: preserve me from the violent man;
Which imagine mischiefs in their heart; continually are they gathered together for war.
They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips.
Selah.

Keep me from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from the violent man; who have purposed to overthrow my goings.
The proud have hid a snare for me, and cords; they have spread a net by the wayside; they have set gins for me. Selah.

I said unto Creation, Thou art my God: hear the voice of my supplications.
O, the strength of my salvation, thou hast covered my head in the day of battle.
Grant not the desires of the wicked: further not his wicked device; lest they exalt themselves. Selah.

As for the head of those that compass me about, let the mischief of their own lips cover them.
Let burning coals fall upon them: let them be cast into the fire; into deep pits, that they rise not up again.
Let not an evil speaker be established in the earth: evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him.
I know that Spirit of Creation will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor.
Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto thy name: the upright shall dwell in thy presence.

From Edward Winslow:

"our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

And Governor Bradford:

"They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports."

SERMON:

Chicago Tribune columnist Eric Zorn wrote a piece this last week about trying to teach his young children to say "Thank you." He wisely chose a path of behavior modification rather than philosophy. In response to such simple acts as being presented a menu by a waiter, he is teaching them to say those two magic words. "Thank you."

Someday they may learn the complex rules of etiquette, and someday they may learn the even more complex laws of give and take which extend far from economics to social graces, and someday they may learn the still more complex creeds of culture which will afford them status according to their fulfillment of its strictures. And I hope that someday they will learn the ultimately complex and utter simple injunction of all cultures and religious traditions: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

But, for now, the best we can hope for these youngsters is that they learn to say "thank you." NO, the best we can hope for these youngsters is that they learn and remember to say "thank you." The best lessons in the world are nothing if not remembered.

However, in this experience we call life, aren't we all youngsters? Are we not all in that phase where we are learning, in which more questions exist than answers? Isn't that, in fact, the essence of our religious understanding of life - that we are here to try to learn all that we can from the experience, knowing that in the boundlessness of all existence the task is both infinite and eternal?

The task becomes all the harder when we have to repeat lessons over and over again, failing to retain the answers we have found, treating old questions as if they were new queries. Just like all youngsters, we find that we need to learn and we need to learn to remember, to hold those things found. No, not just hold those things found, but so incorporate them into ourselves that we no longer know them as separate, as things to be held, but as integral parts of ourselves, constituent elements of our very beings.

Learning and remembering.

That's one of the roles of all things traditional. To help us in that process of remembering - to remind us of those things which have been found, and then have been

learned, and which no need to become part of us. The many gatherings of Thanksgiving were not just about the turkey, the stuffing, and all the rest. They were also about a reconnection to larger things. But, what larger things?

Suppose we were to be able to play the role of the alien - the ultimate stranger - who suddenly find itself seated at a Thanksgiving feast. With the usual alien ability to immediately converse in any language, we could then ask a probing question, such as "why is there Jell-O®?" or better, "What's the origin of all of this?"

What answers would be given, as we, in our pluckiest alien way would keep pushing the question?

Probably we would hear about stories of pilgrims, natives, turkeys, but when pushed as to why those pilgrims would take time out of their harvest for three days of feasting and games, we would probably be told that these pilgrims were very religious people, people who remembered the traditions of their faith.

"What traditions?" we would ask, and someone would get up from the table and go get a well worn book out of the bookcase - it would be black with gold lettering. "Here," they would say, "it's in here."

"What's this?" we would ask, turning the book over and over.

"It's the Bible," they would say, "and it contains the word of God, the Creator of the Universe."

Now, at this point, Uncle Leonard, the one from Skokie would object, saying it was more a compendium of wisdom and stories collected over time, until interrupted by his son, Harold, who would mumble something about a Marxian understanding of the inherent struggle of people with their oppressors. Aunt Sadie would shhush them both, and try to restore order. Eventually, cousin Inez, a second cousin, twice removed, on her mother's side (and we aliens store the question of what a second cousin twice removed is for another time) steers the conversation back to the Bible.

"In here," she begins, pointing to the Bible, "are stories about lots of times of thanksgiving. Way back when they even wrote songs about it - there's a whole book of songs in here. Here, I'll show you."

And Inez thumbs her way through the book, rattling off names of the various parts we see whizzing by (and her nephew Frank mentions something about her showing off her good Lutheran upbringing) until she lands on it: "Psalms!"

"Psalms," we muse. "Sing us one."

"O no," she answers, "we don't sing them anymore - that is, unless you are Jewish, and then you more chant them than sing them. Today we read them, to help us remember what people long ago learned about living."

"OK, please read us one," we ask.

“O dear, where are my glasses?” Inez blurts out, and she quickly leaves the room, and at that point Ralph (who doesn’t seem to be related to anyone but at the same time seems to go on vacation with everyone else in the room but us) picks up the Bible and starts reading, and there is all this talk about evil and wicked people, and then: “Let burning coals fall upon them: let them be cast into the fire; into deep pits, that they rise not up again.”

“Wait,” we cry, “is Thanksgiving about relief from those you don’t like?”

“No, no!” comes from the hallway as Inez runs back in, large-framed glasses on her face now, “listen to this one instead,” and she reads about giving thanks for being, and for mercy and good and truth.

“Ah,” we say, “now we get it, thanksgiving is about having things the way we want them.”

“Yes!” comes back the chorus of voices.

“So,” we continue, “you give thanks because the universe has given you everything you want in the way you want it. Wow, you must be very happy. In fact, you must always be happy, with it all being that way. You must feel like you are living with real abundance.”

Silence.

Deep, melancholy silence.

“More potatoes,” Inez tries, but the moment is gone. All of them know that they will never forget the Thanksgiving dinner with the aliens.

But, the next year, whether we aliens sit down with them or not, the ritual will repeat itself. The same dishes will be made, the same stories told, and the same sense of thankfulness will be remembered. They will never forget the aliens, but they will never remember what they learned that day.

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There is a long thread - a strand of existence - which runs through that Thanksgiving table. Back, way back, on that same strand, early settlers, some in New England, some in Virginia, some in Iceland, some in New South Wales, some in Ethiopia, some in Yang-Dzen - early settlers gathered around a harvest of sustenance and offered words of thanks. Back, even further back, in the barren desert of the middle east, a nomadic tribe sang praises for life itself. Back, even further back, in caves at the edges of plains, around a small circle of light, a small clan would evoke feelings of appreciation and awe for a world which sustained them.

That’s the strand of Thanksgiving - a strand in which the words are not consistent, the interpretations transitory, but the feelings are both universal and eternal. At first spontaneously, and later ceremonially, those feelings linked individual lives with a spirit of abundance. Those feelings linked individual lives with each other. Those feelings linked individual lives, lived in time and space, with a meaning which transcended time

and space.

Now, here we are, on that strand, and we can reach back along it, just as those who brought that Bible to the Thanksgiving table did, reaching back along the strand of thankfulness, along the strand of abundance and gratitude, along the strand of ultimate connection. But, to do so would be to gather only half the picture.

Picture it for yourself. You look along that strand arriving from history, a strand of thankfulness and abundance and gratitude. What are the stories which tell you about that strand? What lives are remembered along its long course? What have you learned about its heritage?

But wait, that strand is not stopping with you. You are on that strand, but it is life itself, it is existence, it is the moving hand of the infinite crossing through time and space, reaching from before toward later. You are caught on its momentary “now” and it is going somewhere. Where is it going? Can you tell?

And suddenly you remember so much - you remember the story of pilgrims, you remember songs of nomadic tribes, and you remember that none of them had reached a place beyond worry, beyond want, beyond doubt, beyond hunger, beyond death, beyond suffering. None claimed to have arrived at the fulfillment of the abundance of the universe, only to be living amidst its possibility.

They stopped and said and sang thanks not so much for what they had, but for something more. They stopped and said and sang thanks because that strand, that strand which eternally linked their individual lives with appreciative lives before their own, moved on through them, moved on toward possibilities glimpsed in the present, moved on toward meaning beyond their knowing but within their appreciation, moved on toward a promise that was yet to be. They stopped and said and sang thanks so that they could live thankfully, and maybe, just maybe for a short time, maybe for a short lifetime, move with that strand as it flowed from promise to fulfillment.

They stopped and said and sang, so they could remember - remember not what had already been, but the promise of what is yet to be. To give thanks to be alive in a universe in which possibility exists, to exist in a universe which is infused with potential, to be in an existence in which hope is abundant.

So, we youngsters find we need to learn . . . we need to learn that our greatest thanks are not for what was or is, but what is yet to be. To learn to say “thanks” simply because ours is a creative existence, offering up possibilities beyond the known. And then to remember what we have learned, so our whole beings are expressions of thanks - endless, hopeful expressions of appreciation for the unknown and the unseen which are yet to arise and arrive.

And if that means we must, like Eric Zorn’s kids who are being taught to say the words of thanks, be taught to live lives of such thanks, so we will remember, then maybe that is one of the greatest definitions we can have of our liberal religion - that here we encourage ourselves and others to remember to say thanks in every act of our living, to be such example of a thankful faith well lived that even aliens sitting at our table could not fail to notice and would need no explanations.