

We Give Thanks for This Precious Day

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The Pilgrims and Puritans came to this continent in search of religious freedom. In the countries they were fleeing, religious freedom was not a right but an offense to God and the Crown that was tantamount to treason and punishable by death. So much so that many of the Pilgrims had to come to America via Holland, a place that even then was known for its liberal and lassie faire approach to life.

As we can discern from our Ancient Reading this morning, the God of the Puritans was a very different God from the one we Unitarian Universalists like to talk about, when and if we talk about God at all. Winthrop's God was the angry God of the Calvinists. It was a God that was given to vengeance and wrathful punishment. To be fair to Winthrop, there are a number of biblical passages, which if you took them at their face value, would certainly lead one to that conclusion: God gets mad at people when they break their promises to him, and when he gets mad those people usually get carried off into exile or some other nasty thing happens to them. This is the God that Winthrop's

Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandchildren, the early Unitarians, would criticize as being unreasonable to their minds and conscious and unworthy of their devotion.

Indeed, stronger critics of this God would go a step further than Channing and his ilk. They would point out to us that most people conceive of the God they need or can understand given their limited horizon. No one can ever truly know God. In this sense both the devout Christian and the atheist are in agreement—all our ideas, conceptions, notions, and understandings of God are too limited and too small. Our narrow conception of God is little more than a mirror on ourselves and our own times. Too often we are tempted to worship the God we need to worship as we would have it. This is as true for the Puritans and Pilgrims as it is for everyone.

In those days, times were extremely tough. After the first year of landing at Plymouth, half of the Pilgrims had died of starvation or disease. Had the Native Americans not shown them how to farm and live off their new land, surely all of them would have perished. Under these conditions of extreme scarcity and fear of the unknown, it is perhaps not surprising that the God the Puritans made for themselves to worship reflected the angry and hostile nature of their environment. To make a “bargain” or a covenant with that force would be an attractive proposition. And so Winthrop, probably preaching his sermon on the

ship taking him to the new world, outlined the nature of their agreement. Have faith, have hope, take care of each other, and all will be well.

Writing hundreds of years later, Sarah Vowell is comforted by John Winthrop's words aboard that ship. She is moved by his vision of a community based on a covenant of how they will walk together through life. This is not news to us, of course. We call this the beloved community and we repeat the nature of our covenant every Sunday in our Unison Affirmation. But to her this was a comforting thought. Indeed it is counter-cultural in the best sense of that term. So often our culture deals in superficialities. Our relationships defined more by consumerist needs rather than authentic sharing and connection. Within the covenant of the beloved community, we define ourselves as human beings through the quality of our relationships: our ability to connect deeply to another, how well we can welcome the stranger in our midst with radical hospitality, and to go beyond tolerating each and move toward honest acceptance of our diversity in all its forms. These are counter-cultural practices, but in a Unitarian Universalist church they make us who we are.

It was not until 9/11 happened practically in Vowell's backyard that she saw some of what it means to live as if our relationships to other people mattered. She remembered collecting toothpaste for firefighters who were removing the rubble from Ground Zero. Anything that she and the folks in her apartment complex to do to help. New Yorkers

lined the blocks in order to give blood. For once they were living out that ideal that Winthrop put before us: to truly care for each other; that we matter to each other.

Whether it was the material deprivation of the early Pilgrims and Puritans or the ghastly horrors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, one begins to get the sense that it is not the material things in life that are the most important. Perhaps those Pilgrims had some non-material resources that we are sorely lacking in our culture these days.

Fortunately we are not facing Pilgrim-like living conditions today. For most of us there is a pretty good chance that we will survive the winter. It is likely that we won't catch some exotic disease that the medical knowledge of our time will be unable to handle. I am fairly certain that most of you have running water at home and can ward off such things with basic sanitation and hygiene. One never knows of course, but I am willing to bet most, if not all of us have it better than the Pilgrims did on their best day.

But that is not to say that times are not tough right now; only that toughness is relative. Indeed we are seeing in the current recession that jobs are still hard to come by and fear is all too prevalent. Our economy is based on confidence in the future, and when there is little of that to go around, then it becomes very hard to turn around the whole economy. In fact it was this fear, or perhaps better despair, that motivated the recent

Occupy movement. With the recession touching people in the middle class, essentially going mainstream in way it hadn't before, despair about the future and about how little people had set in. Sadly the method of the Occupy movement degenerated into chaos, but at least it wasn't as bad as the riots in England earlier this year.

Despite its many flaws, however, Occupy began with some laudable ideals. There is a tremendous economic disparity in our society which has crossed the line into injustice. We need a shift in our perspective. Instead of expecting the material excesses of the past we should focus on what we have right now here in the present. We would also do well to consider among our assets that which is non-material. In Corinthians Paul writes that faith, hope and love are among the most important things in life. The greatest of them is love.

One of the things that has taught me that love is greater than material things is the work done by Independent Living for Young Adults. The kids in ILYA have hardships most of us have never known. Spending one's entire childhood in foster care does not lend to stability in ones formative years. When a child turns 18, then the state is no longer responsible for them. They are sent out into the cold hard world without the support of parents and in some cases any family at all. These young adults often struggle for financial independence. Material assistance certainly helps, hence the backpacks and care packages we do

every year. However, as Paul might remind us, these are not the most important needs in their lives.

Too often it is easy for young people to make poor life choices when faced with large amounts of newly found freedoms. Alcohol, drugs, sex, pregnancy, abusive relationships, these all lurk around us if we have not had the stability of a mentor or a parent to teach us and show us the ways of the world. There are plenty of exceptions of course, but so often it is these life choices that seem to be the biggest challenge for kids getting out of foster care. Could they use money? Of course. But it is really a deeper spiritual need, a spiritual hunger if you will, that is at the root of the issue. They, we, all of us, have a basic human need to feel loved and to love others. In a healthy emotional environment with parents and friends who have good boundaries, the human soul flourishes. However an environment that is filled with addictions and abuse or neglect, does not negate our need to love and be loved. What it does is shift and alter that need to be loved and to love in unhealthy and self-destructive forms. So the need to be loved by one's parents may be so strong that people stay in abusive relationships that they should have left years ago. Or they purposely get pregnant in the hopes of cementing the relationship even though they cannot afford to raise a child. When we deny other people love, and deny it to ourselves, some pretty terrible things result. It really is the greatest gift—because we did nothing to earn it.

Love is something to be grateful for regardless of your net income or whether or not you have the fanciest new smart phone. That stuff doesn't matter really. What we should be grateful for are the simple things, the things right in front of our faces that we too often take for granted every day. It is so easy to fall into that trap because the truly important things in life are not flashy and do not have a marketing firm promoting them. Love, forgiveness, generosity, joy, compassion, hope; these are all things that come to us every single day. If we were to consciously embrace them with the same gusto we embrace the rat race or keeping up with the Jones, then perhaps we would find that elusive happiness we seek.

My family has the tradition, most years, of going around the Thanksgiving table and sharing with each other what we are thankful for. I have to admit that I both love and hate this tradition. On the one hand, it feels a little superficial most of the time. But on the other hand it gets me out of having to say grace over the Thanksgiving meal! One of the occupational hazards of being the only clergy in the family is that I am sometimes called up for impromptu duty for such occasions. So everyone sharing what they are grateful for gets me out of having to do that.

For the spiritual homework this month, under Renew Within, you will see an exercise about making a list of what you are grateful for. Start out with the obvious things; family friends job and so forth. But as

is often the case with spiritual homework, we need to push ourselves to go deeper than that. Try to get up to twenty or so items on your list. Really go deep and be thoughtful. The deeper you go the more meaningful the item in question will be for you. Compare number two to number 18 and ask yourself which is the most important to you.

One of my spiritual heroes is Rabbi Harold Kushner. He is most well known for his book “Why do bad things happen to good people?” but I recommend just about any of his books. One day Rabbi Kushner was going about his business at his synagogue, attending Board meetings, teaching classes and so forth. Then one morning he got a call from his doctor. “Can you come in and have some more tests done?” It appeared that there might be something that showed up on a CAT scan. Could it be a brain tumor? “We won’t know until we do the tests.” Kushner describes how it felt to drive from his office to the doctor. Everything he had planned for the day, all of the projects he was worrying about, had suddenly fallen away. There was nothing else in his world except right here and now. He stayed in that place for the better part of two weeks while he awaited the results of the test he took that afternoon. All of his ambitions for his career and his next book had evaporated. He worried and fretted about his health of course, but he also reprioritized how he spent his time. His wife and family received the lion’s share of his attention. Friends were called, and old acquaintances were reignited. People who had just sort of been in the

background of his life, or who were there every day and perhaps not valued enough, Kushner gave them his full love and attention.

As it turned out, the tests did not reveal anything serious. He had a reprieve from death, but he writes it is only temporary. We all know that death has the final say for each of us. But those weeks, as horrifying as they were, were also clarifying for him. Oh if we could live with that sense of spiritual urgency all the time! Then our whole perspective on our lives might shift. We would see how many of the basic things we would be thankful for when all of the fluff and sparkly gadgets were taken away or brushed to the side. I wonder if some of the ILYA kids live with that level of urgency around their life and their survival. I suspect that is why they are always so grateful for even the smallest gift or gesture.

I know the Pilgrims were. They knew how close they had come to death in the fall of that first year. Thanks to the lessons in farming and living off of the land they had learned from the Native Americans they had food and hope for the coming winter. Winthrop did not talk about God's covenant extending to the Native Americans, and even after living in the Massachusetts Bay colony he probably wouldn't be able to go there. But with our theological perspective of history we can see that the Pilgrims were right to give thanks. They of course gave thanks to the God of their covenant, as they understood him. I think they were partially right. They were in a covenant, a relationship of mutuality,

perhaps with God, but certainly with the Native Americans whose compassion and wisdom had saved their lives. Regardless of that, however, when you have your life given back to you, there is nothing you can do but be grateful.

May we live lives filled with spiritual urgency. May we be honest enough with ourselves to name the things in our life we take for granted but for which we are the most grateful. And may we go forward embracing that gratitude and living accordingly. Amen Blessed Be.