

The Rev. Rob Gregson

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Unitarian Fellowship of Paris

Milles mercis pour votre bienvenue chaleureux. C'est un grand plaisir d'être ici, à ce temps là, avec vous tous, mes amis en fois et un esprit libéraux.

I wish I could say more in la langue indigene but not only would I leave a few of you out, but might set off alarm bells in the Emergency Response Room at l'Academie Francaise. So we will carry on in English, though I hope les francophones among you will also feel welcome and your heritage acknowledged and appreciated au meme temps.

I was asked to speak this morning, in a general and open way, about Thanksgiving and the universal tradition found in most cultures of making time to give thanks: for the harvest, for children, for liberation...so many things. For those of us of North American, and especially US, extraction, Thanksgiving kicks it all off—it is the amuse bouche before the enormous buffet that is the Christmas season. Food is central to Thanksgiving, as it is to most holidays whatever the country or culture. Yet beneath the camaraderie, the food, and even the complicated family dynamics and stress we can feel this time of year there beats a sacred center—a living heart that

we can still feel inside the day, still appreciate for the gift it has yet to give if we are wise, or lucky, enough to notice. At the heart of the Thanksgiving holiday next week is a holy day, a forceful message that compels us -- whether we are ready for it or not--to wrestle with questions of *meaning* the same time every year. Perhaps that is why even expatriates, no matter how long they have lived away from their home countries, still make certain that one particular cookie or sweet, still teach their children special songs and tell them the same old stories that God knows they have heard a million times before. Holidays like Thanksgiving may not be the easiest of times for many of us, and certainly not stress-free, but it can still force us to ask ourselves the question, “*Why are we doing all this?*” So here we are, a polyglot of languages and of beliefs, a real mixed bag if truth be told—here we are once again having arrived at the doorstep of a wintry holiday to ponder yet again that simple, vexing, wondering question: “*Why in heaven’s name do we do this?*”

Well one reason—let's be honest—is the food. I can't speak for those of you who are French, German, Dutch, Chinese, Belgian, or even the Brits (though you Brits did steal our Thanksgiving turkey and make it your traditional Christmas meal...one more debt on the cultural scoreboard!) but for me, one of the glories of a proper American Thanksgiving is the feast.

Sit down any American family who has been in the States for at least two generations, of whatever nationality or faith and I can almost guarantee you that they will be eating something the original Pilgrims who celebrated the first Thanksgiving back in 1621 would have recognized. Most will have a turkey, though vegetarians might prefer a nice nut roast; there is written evidence that there were four wild turkeys at that first Thanksgiving, though venison was probably the main dish served up by the Native Americans invited to take part in that first holiday meal.

Many Americans will have the obligatory burgundy-red cranberry sauce, squash or sweet potatoes. When I was growing up the sweet potato casserole came with marshmallows baked on top—one of those particularly American kinds of culinary magic that I suspect most Europeans would find revolting...I mean, revealing. I loved it, and not-so-secretly still do.

Then there is the stuffing—what is the French equivalent of that I wonder? Things become a bit more complicated when stuffing comes onto the scene: in the American North a simple white bread and sage stuffing is usual while in the South corn bread is used, sometimes with sausage or chestnuts added, sometimes not. Modern hygienic practice has tried to get Americans to see the sense of cooking the stuffing separately outside the bird so nastier kinds of bacteria don't multiply in the moist insides and

sicken all the guests...but that doesn't really involve any actual “stuffing” does it? We take our chances around our table. The Japanese have their fugu sushi—the Gregsons will stick to their Thanksgiving stuffed bird, thanks very much. So far, so good!

There are other items on the Thanksgiving table: often something green and leafy goes down nicely, as otherwise your table can end up looking a field of orangey-tan monochrome. Brussels sprouts are an age-old option. There is debate in some quarters on whether Brussels sprouts even counts as a food—some would argue they are a dangerous pathogen dressed up in veggie clothing—but that's really a personal rather than scientific opinion. I'm quite fond of sprouts myself.

We need some variety in our food; the tongue and nose enjoy different tastes and smells. The Thanksgiving table caters to many different likes and dislikes. The genius of the American, and now increasingly the global, table is that it incorporates bits and pieces from all around the world. An Italian-American neighbour reported on the homemade ravioli she always made for Thanksgiving and Christmas; Russians and Poles might dish up meaty piroshky or kreplach. Jewish Americans throw in some chicken liver pate or smoked salmon as a starter, and Chinese-Americans ladle out won ton soup

or a big dish of shining noodles, symbolic of good fortune and long life. All of it is welcome on the holiday table.

There is another traditional dish served up alongside the sprouts and turkey, the sausage rolls and noodles, and that has something to do with giving thanks. Compared to the amount of time, effort and attention we give to the food it is somewhat embarrassing how little we lavish on the thankful bit. In our family, sorry to say, it's often relegated to a heartfelt minute (or sometimes less) of acknowledging our blessings and giving a brief nod to the fact that not all are so blessed. I am glad that at today's service you introduced the Guest at Your Table boxes and hope that many, if not all of you, take one home and use it as a thanksgiving reminder over the next several weeks.

Another way we try—in the US at least—to extend our appreciation for the meaning behind the message of Thanksgiving is to retell the ancient stories associated with its beginning. We recall how it was for the first Thanksgiving revelers and if we are really paying attention we draw a silver, shining line between the past and those who today still know what it means not to have enough of the very basics of life, whether of food, or heat, or employment or hope.

So in the midst of our food talk let me turn back in time a bit to those first Thanksgivings, to that strict sect of Englishmen and women who fled England in the early 1600s who we know as “Pilgrims.” You know, most of you, that they landed in what is now Massachusetts and proceeded, more or less, to begin dying where they landed. That first New England winter was typically harsh and the colonists were badly battered after their rough crossing and woefully unprepared for what came next. Of the original 102 men, women and children who landed at Plymouth in December of 1620, only 52 survived to see the following summer. Half of all those who had lived, gossiped, eaten, drunk and worshipped together for the 11 years they lived in Holland before making the great voyage across...half of those people perished. They dug more graves than built huts that first year by a factor of 7. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine giving thanks, can you imagine having enough *heart* or perspective or *faith in the future* to give thanks after a year of such unmitigated disaster?

The one instance of observable grace was the appearance, in the spring of 1621, of a young Wampanoag man named Tisquantum. Tisquantum, or Squanto, as he was later known, happened to speak near perfect English and he became in short order the Pilgrims’ unsought, but much needed, messiah. It was Squanto who taught them how to survive

after a year of so much dying: how to plant corn and fertilize it in the thin New England soil with fish parts, and more generally how to cope with wilderness life in their, if not his, New World. That he was willing to help them all is probably the greatest miracle of all, for Squanto had been tricked and then kidnapped, along with 10 others from his village, by an English merchant named Hunt, who then sold them into slavery back in England. When Squanto finally made his way back across the ocean six years later to his own village of Patuxet—right on the site of the future Plymouth settlement as it happened--he discovered that a mysterious plague—probably smallpox or measles brought over by European fishermen or traders—4 years before had completely wiped out his family and most other local inhabitants.

Are you following all this? Death and disease and desolation on the edge of a vast, stony, frozen wilderness for the Pilgrims. Kidnapping and enslavement, escape and then utter desolation all over again for Squanto. Thanksgiving, feasting and fullness, turkey and cranberry sauce and bottle of red Zinfandel out of this?

But that is the story, as near as we can make it. And that story culminated the following autumn with their first successful corn crop and two very different people coming together to give thanks. The Wampanoag

had little reason to like the English; the English had little reason to be all that thankful. Yet they both rose above. Here is Edward Winslow's account of that "First Thanksgiving" back in November of 1621; it is one of only two eyewitness accounts ever recorded.

"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."

Can I repeat that last part please? I think it bears hearing again:

“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.”

Plenty. Goodness of God. Far from want. Makes you think a little, doesn't it, with our needs for nicer things, better models, bigger apartments or skinnier waistlines. Not that any of those are wrong, necessarily...but they begin to look very, very small and maybe not so very wise when held up against this light.

So the English and the Native Americans feasted, even after so much mourning, sorrow and despair, all of them together. And we discover here a people who leave comfort and safety behind in order to create something new, something they hope will last beyond themselves, a lasting legacy for those who came later. We discover a people with such deep hope and faith in their most sacred goals that they stick together through the absolute worst of times. That hope is given words—made *real* in a way--in a language of covenant. Covenant describes a sacred way of being together; it is something that we Unitarian Universalists gathered here today in Paris directly inherit from our Pilgrim predecessors. This is really our holiday, our holy day in a way. The meeting first gathered in Plymouth in 1620 persists today as the UU First Parish of Plymouth, and as First and Second

Church of Boston. We are the inheritors of their legacy—of thanksgiving in the face of every obstacle, even death. The idea of a sacred bond founded on freedom and conscience is OURS, far more than the turkey or stuffing or whatever it is you choose to eat on the fourth Thursday in November. It spawned the Mayflower Compact, which in turn helped lay the groundwork for the Declaration of Independence and the American Republic.

Finally, and this is truly wonderful, awe-inspiring—the real life story of Thanksgiving leads back to acts of hospitality that go beyond what we can easily understand using our heads alone. It leads back to people who gave thanks for yet another crack at life. It leads to an act of compassion breathtaking to behold exercised by a former slave who took pity on those whose own people had enslaved him in the first place. When you celebrate Thanksgiving this year, however you do it, with whatever food or traditions, please take a moment to raise a glass in memory of this man, Tisquantum, and his ability to give seemingly beyond human power.

My nephew, Josh, had an interesting habit when he was younger. When he was at the end of his rope, tired out from doing whatever it is he had been doing, he would sometimes go to his Mom or Dad and say, “I think I need a time out.” Wise kid. We all need a time out in our lives, not just because we are tired but because we are hungry for more. This month some

of us take time out to give thanks and recall that first Thanksgiving, our direct inheritance as Unitarian Universalists. Time out to remember people much like you or me sailing into the unknown, dying one after the other in the cold, and then, because a stranger took pity on them in their misery, surviving to celebrate life another day. What a legacy we have been handed. I wonder how you join this Fellowship will hand it on? Or will it die here with you, or sink into polite oblivion as I fear it will do in too many chapels back in my new homeland?

Thanksgiving should make us think, shouldn't it...it should really make us stop and think back on where it all started, and what it meant, and who helped who, and the covenant free people made to each other, and of the mercy shown to the stranger by the former slave.

Rebecca Harding Davis

For, after all, put it as we may to ourselves, we are all of us from birth to death guests at a table which we did not spread. The sun, the earth, love, friends, our very breath are parts of the banquet... Shall we think of the day as a chance to come nearer to our Host, and to find out something of Him who has fed us so long?

I hope those of you who were there for the social action workshop yesterday will take this Thanksgiving story to heart and pass what you learned along to others. I hope you will, all of you, reach out to those you know who could appreciate and benefit from the same legacy we profit by as free thinking, open hearted Unitarian Universalists. Do you think the world does not need us anymore, our unique story and witness? Did the Pilgrims need Squanto? The people perish, or at least grow weary and forgetful of all they have to be thankful for. Let us pick up the mantle once again, let us tell the stories that make a difference and start making some of our own. I hope your Thanksgiving, whatever you eat or however you celebrate, will be more than just a passing nod at gratitude. I hope it is utterly delicious, but mostly I hope it causes you to stop, to listen, and especially to find one more way to begin saving the world, one Pilgrim at a time.