

Give Thanks in All Things?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Thanksgiving:

Something in our hearts yearns to speak gratitude for the gifts of life:

For food on the table and a roof overhead,
For blue skies and gray, sunlight and rain,
For friends who listen, neighbors who help, love overflowing.

For quiet moments alone,
For excitement, passion, and action,
For tasks that fit our hands and hearts and minds,
For ideas that inspire and principles that guide.

For the knowledge, for the experience that we are connected with one another and with all life.

For all this and more may we lift up grateful hearts in the midst of whatever life has brought to us this season, grateful hearts overflowing with our own gifts and generosity of spirit... to bless the world... with our prayers... and with our lives.

Reading

Our reading this morning consists of excerpts from a speech given by President Kennedy at American University in June of 1963, a speech during which he invited the Soviet Union to the shared work of disarmament and peace-making:

What kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war, not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace -- the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living -- and the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and build a better life for their children -- not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women -- not merely peace in our time but peace in all time.

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Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable -- that mankind is doomed -- that we are gripped by forces we cannot control.

We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made. Therefore, they can be solved by man.

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And is not peace, in the last analysis basically a matter of human rights -- the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation -- the right to breathe air as nature provided it -- the right of future generations to a healthy existence?

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We are not helpless before that task or hopeless of its success. Confident and unafraid, we must labor on -- not towards a strategy of annihilation but towards a strategy of peace.

Sermon

On the afternoon of November 22, 1963, I sat with my classmates in eighth period English class when the terrible, the unbelievable news was given to us over the PA system.

How vividly I can picture the classroom, the shuffling of feet in the hallways as we went to homeroom and then to our buses, the walk from the bus stop to our back door, falling into my mother's arms, both of us in tears.

Saint Paul encouraged the Thessalonian congregation to give thanks in all circumstances. I've preached often on this text. You might say it is my basic Thanksgiving sermon.

But really – in *all* circumstances?

Even on November 22, 1963?

So I remind myself again that Paul did not say, “give thanks *for* all circumstances.” He said “give thanks *in* all circumstances.”

And I think his is good advice.

On that day in November fifty years ago, I don't think that my twelve year old self verbalized or even thought a word of thanks, but I felt it in my bones.

I was grateful to come home, to have a home; grateful to be able to fall into the arms of my mother; throughout that sad, sad, weekend grateful for home and family, grateful for the wisdom of my father taking us all to the cold, windswept beach Saturday or Sunday afternoon – for he knew that it would be good for us, good for our souls, our spirits, to feel the embrace of nature's beauty, to get away from the television with its insistent images of the horrible tragedy and sadness.

Yes, gratitude – whether I ever said the words during those days following the assassination of our president – gratitude helped me, as it helped our family, find the ground beneath our feet.

I have experienced this, too, in times of personal trial and grief. I've seen this in others, time and again. I expect you have had this experience too.

In the midst of hardship or sadness, finding and naming for yourself what you still have for which to be grateful, grounds you once again in your life, in this world, in the beauty of creation.

Not that this is always easy!

For first does indeed come the sadness or the pain or the grief or the loss... and often the anger or regrets or whatever other feelings follow in the wake of some difficult, sad, or tragic event

But then, eventually, somehow – and to a large extent it seems to be a natural movement of the soul – we do well to heed the simple words of the Christian monk,

Meister Eckhart, who wrote many centuries ago that if the only prayer we ever said was “Thank you” it would be enough.

“Thank you.”

Sounds easy enough, certainly is or should be easy enough in good times. But how easy in hard times?

“Thank you”... when you’ve just lost your job?

“Thank you”... as you face illness or loss or betrayals or any of the variants of “hard times” that can befall us human beings?

“Thank you?”

Well, paradoxically that often *is* one of our human responses... not *to* hard times, but in the midst of hard times. For, again, this is not (of course not) about being grateful *for* whatever suffering has befallen us; but the hard time can remind us of those things for which we still are grateful, remind us of what we still have, remind us of the gifts still in our lives, remind us of the support and love we have to help us through the hard times, remind us of our own strength. And so, remind us to give thanks.

So it is what we do on Thanksgiving Day. It is what Jews do on Hanukkah, which as you know coincides with Thanksgiving this year (for the last time for over 70,000 years!) – give thanks – if nothing else for pure survival, but also for the religious freedom the Maccabees had regained.

Give thanks even though we also remember the suffering of the Pilgrims and Puritans, the suffering of the native peoples displaced by the Europeans, remember the suffering of the Maccabees.

Yet give thanks.

A story is told of a Thanksgiving dinner on a hot and humid day. (It was probably not in New England!) The family had invited a number of guests to share the meal, and as they sat down the mother of the family said to her young son, “Sidney, will you please say grace before we start the meal?”

“But, Mom,” said Sidney, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh, just say what you’ve heard me say,” replied his Mom.

So everyone bowed their heads and Sidney spoke: “Oh, Lord, why did I invite these people here on a sweltering day like this?”

(adapted from *Humorous Stories about the Human Condition*, ed. by Eric W. Johnson)

Maybe Sydney should have just said, “Thank you!”

But he didn’t. And I’m guessing everyone had a good laugh, and we need humor too – something else for which we can be most grateful indeed.

Finally then. Another way of understanding Thanksgiving and gratitude in general is as an opportunity to remind ourselves of what really matters – for what therefore can we be grateful even in hard times. Such things as I named in my meditation:

Blue skies and gray. Sun and rain.

The beauty of a song or symphony.

Of course one another. Kindness. Love. Life itself.

In this spirit is an ancient saying from the Jewish *Talmud*: “Who is rich? He who is content with his portion.”

There is a Native American prayer that concludes with these words:

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it was not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way.

A reminder that the gifts of life are so abundant as to be impossible to name with any sense of completeness. Once you start giving thanks, how could you possibly not leave something or someone out? We are so indebted. So we humbly and simply give thanks. “Thank you,” we pray.

As I’ve pondered the loss of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, often framed as a loss of innocence, a loss of idealism, shattered dreams and hopes... often coupled with insistent “what ifs...” I’ve circled around to the reality that of course we don’t and can’t know what might have been. Kennedy, for all of his many gifts, was far from a perfect leader, or a perfect human being, and who knows what would have come from a second administration. But his legacy of idealism, the seeds he planted for civil rights, his opening towards peace with the Soviet Union... have all borne fruit in due time. Yes, I know about everything else – Vietnam not least.

But who knows? Let us be grateful for what we had and for what he inspired now for generations. And let us, from the ground of gratitude, continue.

Yes, we will have all kinds of feelings – whether about the terrible loss of fifty years ago, and about other difficult events in our lives during this season of Thanksgiving – sadness, regrets, anger... maybe sometimes just exasperation and exhaustion like the mother in that story – our lives are complex and layered.

But returning to a simple “thank you” (to one another, for the best of our nation’s democratic traditions, for the beauties of the creation, and to the source of life and love)... a simple “Thank you” may indeed help us through... the dinner to begin with... not to mention the rest of our lives, easy times and hard.

So may it be.