

Thankfulness

Earlier this week, I took the time to look up “the true thanksgiving story” – I knew that the version I learned as a small child wasn’t quite true, but I needed to refresh my memory about what really happened.

the story of what really happened isn’t too far off – that in 1621, the few surviving pilgrims and a band of 90 or so Wampanoag had a shared meal and 3 days of games, sport, and shared hunting trips. Both the native folks and the European immigrants had long traditions of fall harvest feasts – indeed, the fall harvest feast, along with the celebration of the beginning of spring, are the oldest human religious and cultural holidays. Well before the Pilgrims and Wampanoag shared a meal in 1621, join thanksgiving celebrations were held in Virginia and in Florida.

But when you search for the true thanksgiving story, you also get two other narratives, two other versions of the story. They use the same facts, but it is a whole other world.

One of these you might expect: the tragic and horrific story of what happened to the native people before and especially after these feasts – the taking of land and people, the spreading of disease and poverty, the forced marches, the wars, the forced conversions and loss of culture, all that has come to pass in these 500 years of manifest destiny, greed, and conquest. That’s all true, of course, and I think it is a wise reminder that we not tell the thanksgiving story out of context, that thanksgiving should indeed begin with confession: with knowledge of the mistakes we have made, and the evil from which some of us have benefited, even though we did not do it with our own hands. You confess first, and then you offer thanksgiving for forgiveness, for the possibility of new beginnings and new justice.

The other version of “the true thanksgiving story” took me by surprise. There’s a whole set of articles and sites devoted a hyper-capitalist version of Thanksgiving. I kid you not. They say that the first two years in Plymouth colony were a disaster; only a few folks did all the work, while the rest were lazy. See, they owned everything in common, so it didn’t matter if you worked or not. But in the third year, Governor Bradford decided to give everyone their own property and, like Ayn Rand could’ve told you, they finally had enough food, and that’s when they really gave thanksgiving. Yeah, for private property and enlightened self-interest! I kid you not.

What these other stories tell me as that the original story, the story of 50 hungry but hopeful settlers and 90 native-born citizens of the land, being together,

this story is powerful. It is subversive even,
a danger to the values of control and conquest,
a reminder of what was lost and can yet be found again,
an act of beauty in world that has been and can be ugly,
an act of sharing against all odds.

It wasn't permanent, and it didn't stop all that came later.
Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't, the best way to organize society.
But it spoke to the human longing,
and the sacred teaching,
that the world we live in a shared world,
that when we give thanks for the harvest,
when we give thanks at all,
we should do it with others, in community.
For the world is shared.

I know that the things I am most thankful for are things I share with others:
for my family, and my friends, who share their life with me.
for my colleagues who share their wisdom and care with me.
for the earth, which shares its abundance with all.
for this church, which is shared by all of us gathered here.

What are you thankful for?
What shared thing? What act of community do you give thanks for this day?

I'll ask you to turn to someone seated near you –
please look around and make sure no one is left out –
and very briefly share something that you share with others,
that gives you gratitude and hope.
I'll give you a moment or two, then sound the bell.

Cookie Communion

Before communion, before thanksgiving, comes confession.
Unitarian Universalists don't confess, don't admit our mistakes and failings,
often enough. We get the heeby-jeebies about it;
we know we're not perfect but we don't think we're all bad, either.
That's OK.
But it is good and wise to say, first, we have erred.
We have, sometimes, closed our minds and our hearts.
We have, sometimes, gone along to get along when we knew better.
We have, sometimes, delayed justice for the sake of comfort.
We have, sometimes, dreamed too small or lived too small in the face of our dreams.
We have, sometimes, stood on the side of the powerful when they were wrong.
These things, and more, we confess, we admit.
We resolve ourselves to do better, keep trying, knowing we can do better.
We forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love.

And we give thanks. We give thanks that we can do better,
and we give thanks for those who do,
and we give thanks for all that is shared in the world.
We give thanks for moments of beauty, for miracles of community,
and acts of love.
We give thanks for compassion and the spirit of justice.

The subversive spirit of Thanksgiving is that folks who are different –
as different as the people waiting for their flight in Albuquerque,
as different as English Pilgrims and Wampanoag Indians,
share a meal. To eat together is to make community.
To eat together in worship is to remind us of the sacred power of community,
to enact and recreate and bind together one people in the spirit of love.

We make the world when we share it.
So come and each and be fed.
Cookies, of course. Jerri Jones made cookies for our communion today.
How grateful we are.
The world is shared together, may it be so.
This is both a fact – that we share our world, like it or not –
and it is an aspiration, that all we live together in the shared world, in peace and cooperation.
The world is shared by all, may it be so.
I invite you to come forward down the center aisle,
come to take a cookie.
When you pick one up, I or Susan will say,
“The world is shared by all” and you will reply “may it be so.”