

***Is There Crabgrass in the Lawn of Your Life?***  
**Thanksgiving Sunday, November 22, 2015**

Do you want to hear a secret? Most ministers do not like preaching on Thanksgiving. Including me. At our UU area clergy meeting this week, we were talking how hard it is to balance all the tensions of the occasion –

First of course, we have to remember the Pilgrims who came to a new land to build a new Jerusalem, yet not forget how they pushed out, often violently, the native people who greeted them, and how there would not have been room on the shores for the new settlers if, before their arrival, leptospirosis had not wiped out whole villages along this coast. This year there's the added tension of celebrating this feast day of refugees, as our nation, our state, and perhaps even our dinner tables argue over whether to welcome today's refugees.

Then we have to balance the tension of those dinner tables. Groaning under the weight of turkey, stuffing, and pies, but also often under the weight of family disagreements, unhappiness, disapproval, and loss. One of my colleagues is actually preaching today on how to deal with your relatives on Thanksgiving. What happens when the Donald Trump supporter is sitting next to someone who feels the Bern? I still remember the Thanksgiving from my childhood when Uncle Jeffrey and Uncle Marc argued over whether smoking should be allowed or banned on airplanes. I think that was the last Thanksgiving they sat down together.

And then we have to be mindful of the individual griefs, losses, and struggles each of us is carrying this year – the deaths of parents, children, and friends; worries about aging parents who maybe shouldn't be cooking and carrying the turkey anymore, about youth and young adults who are bringing new people to our tables. Some of us are living with cancer and other serious illnesses or taking care of loved ones who are; some of us are in unhappy marriages or relationships; some of us are lonely; some of us are looking for work; all of us are looking for meaning and a way to make sense of a world often seeming overrun with violence and suffering.

Now you know why I and my colleagues have trouble preaching on this day. With all this in the background, how can we say "Eat turkey, and count your blessings?"

The problem with Thanksgiving as we celebrate it now is that it's supposed to be a day without nuance. You give thanks for all that you have. In its origins, though, days of Thanksgiving were not about blessings accrued. Days of Thanksgiving were declared not after good events but after bad ones. The Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving

occurred after a year in which almost half the original company died. Abraham Lincoln issued his proclamation of the first national Thanksgiving on October 3, 1863 only a few weeks after the two bloodiest days in American history: at the battle of Chickamauga almost 35,000 men on both sides were killed or injured. And this was only 3 months after the battle of Gettysburg when somewhere around 50,000 soldiers were killed or wounded. No one among the Pilgrims' company or at the church services and tables in 1863 was unreservedly happy. All of them had lost loved ones or were living themselves with wounds seen and unseen, and yet they gave thanks.

They gave thanks in the spirit of the apostle Paul, who wrote from prison to the community of Jesus-followers he had organized in Phillipi: "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice... I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need." Or in the spirit of Job, who after having his crops, his animals, and finally his children destroyed, still was able to say, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." For them, Thanksgiving was about finding reason to praise in the midst of suffering, not praising because life had no suffering.

Less exalted than Lincoln, less historic than the Pilgrims, Charlie Brown, Linus, Lucy, Snoopy and the rest of the company created by Charles Schulz also remind us that in the midst of suffering we are to praise. I am purposely not referring to them as "The Peanuts Gang" because Charles Schulz hated that name for his comic strip. It was forced on him by the publisher and he himself never referred to his characters that way. That's one way that you can tell the new movie isn't true to the spirit of Charles Schulz. He would never have called it *The Peanuts Movie*. But more deeply, the movie makes you mourn the cartoonist because of its unrelenting optimism. It has the big unabashedly happy ending which Charles Schulz never offered to his characters because he knew that would diminish them. Charlie Brown is an every man, an every person, precisely because of his loneliness, his failures, his questions, and yet his ability to keep on being kind, keep on asking questions, keep on offering a hand to his friends. Linus is wise but only as long as he holds onto his security blanket. Lucy expresses the anger and frustration we all feel but usually hide, and also connects to us in her unrequited love for Schroeder.

In the world of Charlie Brown, the Great Pumpkin never arrives; Lucy never gets what she really wants – real estate; Charlie Brown's Little League team takes 43 years to win their first game. If you read over the strips, as I've been doing, you notice over and over the characters grappling with existential questions as in one where Peppermint Patty asks Charlie Brown, "What do you think security is, Chuck?" And Charlie Brown replies, "Security is sleeping in the back seat of the car

when you're little and you've been somewhere with your mom and dad and it's night and you're riding home in the car. You can sleep in the back seat. You don't have to worry about anything. Your mom and dad are in the front seat and they do all the worrying. They take care of everything." "That's real neat," smiles Peppermint Patty. But Charlie Brown goes on, "But it doesn't last. Suddenly you're grown up and it can never be that way again. Suddenly it's over and you'll never get to sleep in the back seat again! Never!" "Never?" "Absolutely never!" But in the final panel, Peppermint Patty says, "Hold my hand, Chuck!" and he does.

That's the enduring beauty and wisdom of this strip – that in the midst of loneliness, anxiety, of good grief and bad grief, we can offer and find a hand.

"Happiness is a warm puppy," is one of the most famous of Schulz's drawings, but happiness is only a warm puppy because we need to be snuggled.

Over and over these panels remind us that there is crabgrass in the lawn of our lives, whether it's big sisters as Linus says, or work as Snoopy thinks. But you can't have a lawn without crabgrass unless it's artificial. And you can't have a life without suffering and sadness unless it's artificial. For Thanksgiving to be a real holiday, not a sanitized one, we must around our tables learn to give thanks for the differences among us, for the aching holes, the disappointments. We must learn to see, as Schroeder explains in another strip, that "a person who never suffers, never matures... Suffering is very important."

As Barbara Crooker wrote in her *Praise Song*, we must learn to praise not just the long lush days of June, but the fading light of November, the husks and shells of former flowers, and the whole "crazy, fallen world."

And this year especially it seems we do live in a crazy, fallen world, with horrific bombings in Beirut, Paris, and Mali, with unarmed African American men being killed, refugees dying on their journeys to countries closing their borders to them, and ever-increasing disparities between the rich and everyone else. How do we praise this world?

First, we see it for what it is – we don't sugar-coat it into a world where everything happens for a reason, or where a happy ending is a sure thing - as in the new Peanuts movie. We acknowledge that we do not live in the world we hoped for, the world our Puritan ancestors in this church came here to build, or the world many of our ancestors came here more recently hoping to find. We live in the real world – always in a mixture of joy and sorrow, of connection and disaffection, of care and greed.

And then like Paul, like Job, like William Brewster and Abraham Lincoln, like Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty, we choose to rejoice, give thanks, and sing. For love and thanksgiving are not emotions – they are choices. And faith is not a matter of belief – it is a matter of choice. As people of faith, over and over we choose

to hope and to act in hope. As people of faith we train ourselves to see the signs of hope in the crazy world – Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty holding hands as they realize what it will mean to be an adult; the gatherings in Paris to light candles, sing, hold hands, and say again that the violence will not tear the city apart; the work of the UU Service Committee and other agencies offering shelter, food, education, and training to people in need. We train ourselves to hope. We train ourselves to love. We train ourselves to give thanks for all we have received and for all we may give. We train ourselves to praise.

Thanksgiving Day is never a culmination. It is a stop in the journey each year reminding us that whatever the circumstances of our lives, we can give thanks that we are alive, that we have food to eat, a hand to grasp, and work to do. As Charlie Brown put it in a strip in the 1950's to baby Sally, "Maybe if you and I stick together as brother and sister, we can lick this old world yet! What do you say?" And Sally, too young to speak, raises her bottle in a toast while thinking "I'll drink to that!"

To close, words of advice from my favorite character Lucy to Charlie Brown who has visited her psychiatrist booth again seeking advice. "What can you do when you don't fit in? What can you do when life seems to be passing you by?" he asks. Lucy gets up from behind her stand and leads Charlie Brown to the top of a small hill. She gestures around them saying, "See the horizon over there? See how big the world is? See how much room there is for everybody? Have you ever seen any other worlds?" "No," says Charlie Brown. "As far as you know, this is the only world there is, right?" "Right." "You were born to live in this world, right?" "Right." "**Well, live in it then!** Five cents, please."

Let us live in and give thanks for this world even as we never stop building the world of our dreams.

- Pamela M. Barz

## Readings

### *Praise Song* by Barbara Crooker

Praise the light of late November,  
the thin sunlight that goes deep in the bones.  
Praise the crows chattering in the oak trees;  
though they are clothed in night, they do not  
despair. Praise what little there's left:  
the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls,  
shells, the architecture of trees. Praise the meadow  
of dried weeds: yarrow, goldenrod, chicory,  
the remains of summer. Praise the blue sky  
that hasn't cracked yet. Praise the sun slipping down  
behind the beechnuts, praise the quilt of leaves  
that covers the grass: Scarlet Oak, Sweet Gum,  
Sugar Maple. Though darkness gathers, praise our crazy  
fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never enough.

From a cartoon by Charles Schulz:

Linus and Charlie Brown are walking. Linus says: My dad and I got into a theological argument last night. He was looking at my report card, and wondering why I was the only one in my class who didn't get an "A" in spelling. I said, "Isn't it wonderful how each of us on this earth was created just a little bit different?" That's when we got into the theological argument.