



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Attending to Thanks

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, November 24, 2019

Most of here will sit around a table this weekend to be together and give thanks for the blessings of life. There is usually much ado around UU Thanksgiving tables about just who to give thanks to. I have heard many wonderful graces given thanking God, Life, the Earth and my personal favorite “to whom it may concern” thanks for bounty of our lives. It has become, alas, true that Thanksgiving is seen by many as only a starting point for the Christmas frenzy. “Black Friday” that day after Thanksgiving this next week is a recognized national holiday. I am not kidding.

It seems almost obligatory that ministers say a little something about the original thanksgiving. The myth says that when the Pilgrims arrived in 1620, they originally headed for Virginia but were blown off course and landed at Plymouth, MA. Not really much of a rock there by the way. Originally the pilgrims thought this land “sweet and gentle” only soon to realize, having arrived just before winter, that it was anything but. In the course of that first winter, half the men and two thirds of the women had died of cold, disease and starvation. The following spring the indigenous people, the Indians to us white immigrants, made contact with the beleaguered pilgrims. They showed them how to plant seeds, build better shelters, find medicinal herbs for health, how to hunt and trap and tan fur. The bounty of the following autumn was great and so, legend has it, we pilgrims invited these natives to celebrate and give thanks.

Well that is the myth anyway. David Silverman, author of [This Land is Their Land](#), wrote that “the first Thanksgiving was not a “thanksgiving,” in Pilgrim terms, but a “rejoicing.” An actual giving of thanks required fasting and quiet contemplation; a rejoicing featured feasting, drinking, militia drills, target practice, and contests of strength and speed. It was a party, not a

prayer, and was full of people shooting at things....The Wampanoag heard the shots fired and went to investigate and, as part of ritualized treaty process sat down to eat....the celebrants might well have feasted on wild turkey, the local diet also included fish, eels, shellfish, and a Wampanoag dish called nasaump, which the Pilgrims had adopted: boiled cornmeal mixed with vegetables and meats. There were no potatoes (an indigenous South American food not yet introduced into the global food system) and no pies (because there was no butter, wheat flour, or sugar). And it wasn't just a few Indians it was a warring party 90 men strong. (adapted from Silverman as quoted in Philip Deloria's article "Thanksgiving in Myth and Reality" New Yorker 11/25/19)

The holiday of Thanksgiving was actually proclaimed by Lincoln following the Civil War as a way to bring the country back together in a national day of prayer and feasting. The myth of a peaceful thanksgiving meal has been overlaid onto our holiday by a colonizing people, us. Well, most of us. Because this is not the New World to the indigenous people who have lived here for thousands of years. This is their old world that we as white people came and took from them. The UUA common read is "The Indigenous People's History of the United States." I commend that book to you. It's eye-opening in its revelation that all this land we call ours, was, and is not, ours. Having said that though, I still see value attending to that which we have to be thankful for. As Anne Lamott put it, there are really only three essential prayers to say, "Wow, Help and Thanks." It is to that prayer of thanks we turn our attention now.

This is a secular holiday with deep religious overtones and history. In the Pilgrim myth there is no doubt thanks were given to the gods of each tribe. The sky God of the pilgrims and the Earth Circle of the Indian, even given that these pilgrims saw their native hosts as beneath them, even given that they thought their god superior, even given that they would the following year begin the long slaughter and displacement that would become the sad history of our civilization towards native peoples, those pilgrims must have been truly thankful for the natives themselves. As people.

What I try to take away from the myth of that first Thanksgiving is that beyond providence and religion, we all need to give thanks first and foremost for those who make life worth living. The ones we love. Our family and our friends. While we may give thanks for so much that is not of our making, I believe we need to give even more thanks for those people around us known and unknown who make being human so vital. We need to give thanks to those who pay attention to us.

The worth of being human, what I believe ought to be our first thanksgiving, would not be possible if we didn't have a sense of responsibility and attention towards one another. To be fully human is to take responsibility for ourselves and each other. Beyond our own bodily needs, we each have a responsibility to each other. The natives of America took responsibility. Their ethic of honoring life made this necessary. When was the last time you stopped by to help someone whose car has broken down? I have started to do this. I recommend this as a way to give thanks. As Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Can you hear me?

But what have we done to carry on that lesson? To be attentively thankful is to take responsibility for others. For our families, be the first to mend a fight, for our communities, giving as generously as we have done, and for our world.

What I love about Thanksgiving is that it is a holiday that reminds us of our on-going need to give love. A thanks that we all still have the power to create. Knowing full well that life will take an unexpected turn as it did for our pilgrim forebears. We create best when we give thanks and work towards those relationships we love. Thanksgiving is a relational holiday, celebrated with others. Much more than a meal, it is a celebration of being together.

Some time ago a traveler came into my office to talk. He was on his way to visiting his mother. But he wasn't at all sure he wanted to go. Why? "She makes me feel so dependent. All my life I have felt her hand on me. I moved away to be my own person." "Are you?" I asked. "Am I what?" "Your own person." "I think so but I still love her, is that being

dependent?” “No,” was my reply, “that is being human.” We are born into dependence and chances are we will die in dependence. Inter-dependence is more important than either extreme. Too much or too little leaves us crushed or lonely, sometimes both. Trust that we can grow up, and give thanks for that. Trust is what brought the natives out to help the pilgrims. Trusting others is the tent of pilgrimage towards being fully human. The self-permission to risk interrupted plans and to throw open the doors of the soul to change. Trusting one another is absolutely basic to nurturing our worth as a humanity together.

I will give thanks for the ones I love, the ones I trust, each of you, and the ability to create a better world. I trust my kids to tell me the truth about who I am. Parents, are you trusting your kids?

Thanksgiving is probably the most UU of holidays because no one faith tradition claims ownership. Unlike Christmas for Christians, the nationalism of the Fourth of July, even the pagan origins of Easter and Halloween, Thanksgiving is the curious mix of secular and sacred that Forest Church and others have so aptly identified as our greatest gift to the American ethos. So, this season, let us give thanks first for each other and then for the blessing of life, the very act of living in this shared humanity. And throughout the year by showing our worth through trust, responsibility and inter-dependence, may we all become more fully human and worthy of life. Amen.