

Thanksgiving in All Things

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson November 27, 2016

Alright. Get out your Kleenex. I've got mine. But you won't need it yet, because first we're going to talk about the Pilgrims. It may be the week after I've announced my retirement for next August, but it is also Thanksgiving Sunday. I hope that you all had a good feast, that your conversations with your relatives were at least respectful, and that something about the holiday at least gave you a break from your worries, if you have them, about our nation.

Because...gratitude does that. It puts the gift of our lives in perspective.

You may remember a bit of the story of Thanksgiving, that as the pilgrims approached their first anniversary of their November arrival, their first impulse was to honor their arrival with a day of mourning. After all, every family had lost at least one member to that first terrible winter, and many families had lost half or more of their members. But another group of pilgrims said, "well, of course, we must honor our dead, but on the other hand, we have had a lot of good fortune. We found caches of food left by native Americans, and when we met them in the Spring, they were helpful and generous. We learned from them how to plant crops here in the New World, and we have had a good harvest. This winter every family has a cabin against the cold. Our first babies have been born. Yes, we have suffered, but we should honor our first anniversary with a fest of thanksgiving.

And, of course, they did. Joy and Sorrow were, no doubt, woven fine in that gathering. That's one of a number of things that we sometimes gloss over about the Thanksgiving story in years when all seems well. The Pilgrims were still grieving terrible losses and were now facing another cold winter.

We look back on this story with mixed emotions. This wave of immigrants to this land are the ancestors of some of us, and their story a national icon, but all was not hunky dory. Future relationships with their Native American neighbors are a stain on our history which we still have not found a way to heal. Many uncertainties still awaited the Pilgrims, and their hopes to establish a society governed by THEIR values were soon eclipsed by our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims, whose way set New England, and then the nation, on the course which is now history. But for that day, they gave thanks and were strengthened to face what would come.

Gratitude does that. It strengthens us.

And when Abraham Lincoln revived this holiday of Thanksgiving after the Civil War, the national mood had the same mixed emotions. There was both rejoicing that the war was over and terrible grief for the unprecedented loss of young life on both sides that was the consequence of that war. And there was worry for the future and that worry became more acute after the assassination of Lincoln and the backlash against progress that followed. The arc of universe that bends towards justice took an s curve, and things were not well at all. And yet, we have celebrated a day of gratitude on the fourth Thursday of November ever since.

Political uncertainty, danger ahead, losses behind...change in the air...do you relate? So do I. So...let's throw a feast. Let's shake off the stress and the worry and focus on the things that have made us happy and proud. Let's for the moment, let the rest be as it is. Right?

Gratitude does that.

It is possible that the Pilgrims and even the unorthodox Lincoln were inspired by a verse in the New Testament, in which the apostle Paul writes that we should "give thanks in all things"

It is an interesting construction, to give thanks "IN" all things. That's different from giving thanks "FOR" all things, which could get us into impossible places. Give thanks for cancer? For the death of children on a school bus? For racist attacks on our neighbors of color?

Uh.... No. Let's not go there. But it is not necessary, for our lives are always more than the difficulties, griefs, and miseries that we face. For most of us, during most of the days of our lives, the gift of life all by itself, no matter the circumstances, is worth our gratitude, and when we are recalled to that, the rest falls away, at least for a while. I see this a lot, as I help families in times of grief or visit with people who are very ill or dying. They are so grateful. Grateful for the visit, grateful to the nurse who comes in to turn off the beeping machine. Grateful for those who come to the memorial service, who brought the cookies, babysat the young nieces and nephews... did all the things that people do. In the midst of their grief, their pain, the losses they endure and face, they are grateful. Not for all things, but in all things, in the totality, they are grateful. And they are better for that gratitude.

Social science has proven this over and over. People given the task of writing down three things they are grateful for each morning are, within weeks, noticeably happier, getting more exercise, and enjoying better health than those in a control group. Now you know, if somebody invented a medicine that you could take every morning that would do that much good for a person's health, with no side effects whatsoever, that company would be rich beyond measure and we would all be enjoined to add this medicine to our daily lives. But writing in a journal? Nobody makes money that way. But that doesn't mean it is not more effective than

many medicines that cost an arm and a leg. So...just do it. There is nothing magical about the journal. Keep notes in your phone. Make your list in your head. Tell your spouse. Whatever works for you. Make a practice of gratitude.

How does this work? Well, the magical thing about gratitude is that when we are focused on what we are grateful for, we are no longer focused on desiring a different life. Instead we are focused on making the best of the life we do have. And that starts a cascade of desire to take care of ourselves, to share our blessings, to choose a positive rather than a negative attitude, and all of those choices help us to feel happier.

Three gratitudes a day.

The day after thanksgiving, I sat with my coffee at the kitchen window and focused on the old sleeping bag I'd tossed over the cold frame. It's a really old sleeping bag...it was my childhood sleeping bag. It sheltered me many a night on family trips, was my adult picnic blanket, and when it got too scrungy for even that, became the extra cover on the cold frame. I'm devoted to growing lettuce for Christmas dinner, and that's what it takes.

Had the sleeping bag not torn in the wind, I doubt I would have noticed it at all. If I had not set myself the task of writing down three gratitudes, I probably would have only lamented that it would need to be mended or perhaps even consigned to the trash. Instead, I spent a few pleasurable minutes remembering family camping trips, and especially the one when we camped next to an evangelical church group bent on converting us. My humanist father could take only so much of that. "We don't share your religion," he said, "but I'm sure we share gratitude for this beautiful place..." (This happened at Yosemite), "and one thing I am grateful for is that in this country we are free to believe differently." They all nodded in polite agreement.

Gratitude does that, too.

But this weekend, of course, having spent the last couple of weeks working on the plans and tasks of announcing my retirement.... We planned to do this earlier, but so many were so devastated after the election, we waited as long as we felt we could.... Anyway, this weekend, the focus of my gratitude has been on you, on this church, on looking back at a career which was not always smooth sailing but which has been wonderful anyway...maybe even wonderful because of the weathered storms.

You know, when I came here, I knew it might be quite a short ministry. I was this congregation's sixth minister in its nearly 40 years, and while there were many stories about those ministers and those relationships, they all pretty much boiled down to, "Ministers abandon us." The UUA staff person who told me his side of the church's history...sad story

after sad story, mostly about ministerial misses and malfeasance, finally said to me. "I can tell you've decided to go, but do you understand what all this means?" "Yes," I said. "It means it will be a while before they trust me or follow my leadership." He got this surprised look on his face and said, "Well, if you understand that, I think you ought to go. I think you might be able to make a difference there."

Years later, when telling my colleagues this story, it occurred to me to ask myself what he had thought I meant by "a while". Because I had meant three years. In the end, it was 15.

There was a point at that three year mark at which I wondered if I should go. We'd had a pretty big fight by then, and a group had split off to form the Albuquerque Fellowship. But the congregation had also grown, the majority seemed to want me to stay, and it seemed that it would be good for the congregation to get over its long standing "Let's reject the minister before the minister rejects us" stance, so I didn't. I'd come to care about this church, and it seemed that what it needed its 6th minister to do was to stick around, be trustworthy, and build a solid relationship....prove to its people that ministers could be counted on not to abandon churches at the first provocation, or to fall prey to hazards of stress. Anyway, William and I had come to love the west, New Mexico, and here. I decided to stay and the congregation decided to take the risk of bonding a little closer, giving a little more authority, and going on. I am so grateful! Not for the fights and the anguish and the fears of failure....not for all things, but for the whole of it...in all things.

It was a good decision, and, as a matter of fact, I made it two more times over those first 15 years and so did the congregation, and the result was that good relationship, the robust health, the growth, and the capacity for service that this vibrant congregation now has. I am so grateful. Now I'm not only grateful in all things, I'm grateful for...well, most things. Because the fights and the anguish and the fears, they taught me things I needed to know, forced me to reach out for help, strengthened my spiritual resources, made me who I am. Thank you!

I am grateful for... you the people of this congregation, and the ones who came before you....and not just my 28 years but another almost 40 years before that...a people who built an institution devoted the practice and teaching of a liberal approach to religion, open to all, and emphasizing not only the creation of community here, but the betterment of the community around here. It was a sturdy, dedicated bunch of lay people who started this congregation, and because of them, besides that "let's reject her before she rejects us" business, where was a bedrock of focus on the mission, the health, and the well-being of the congregation. It was in the bricks, from the beginning, and it asserted itself over and over again through the years when times were really difficult... when a popular minister left after only three years to take a more prestigious pulpit. When it was so hard to raise money the board had to decide which bills to pay that month. When a long time minister so succumbed to alcoholism he had to be

fired. When the new young woman minister” who will leave us like the rest of them,” insisted on asking more of the beloved, “has stuck with us through thick and thin” music director than that music director was willing to give... when those things threatened to go nuclear, another force always arose. “This church is important to us and to the community. We’ll do what we need to do to keep the doors open, now and in the future.” Oh, how grateful I am for that impulse! I know you are, too.

The change we all face now, with the ending of a long term ministry and the need for the congregation to choose it’s next senior minister...it is a change, not a crisis. We’ve all known it was coming. Plans have been made, but more than that, a foundation that was laid 67 years ago and built on considerably during the last 28...that foundation is strong, and it supports people who are sturdy, and willing, and generous and faithful. And I am grateful...in all things, and in this.