

## **“Giving Thanks”**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 20, 2022**

To those who celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving typically marks the beginning of a cascade of gift buying, anticipation, and anxiety – signified by the onset of Black Friday as retailers cash in on this consumer angst. No matter what a person celebrates, the inevitable lack of sunlight and general cultural distress and malaise can trigger a season of stress. I invite us, this morning, to step away from the lure of holiday and seasonal pressures and frustrations and instead focus our attention on gratitude and small blessings, those things we can easily overlook and yet those things that mark the wonder lying beneath the surface of trips to the mall and societal pressure to appear happy and at ease. The holiday season’s anxieties appear different to varying groups of people, those with various economic means, those with different family relations or familial expectations, those in mourning or those who suffer from seasonal depression. And yet one thing I hope can tie us all together, strengthening those sacred bonds of our web of life, is a moment – a yearly reminder – to give thanks. An opportunity to give and to receive.

I am reminded of a common practice families share of exchanging gratitude with one another around their holiday tables. Gratitude for – often – family or feasting or love or connection. I wonder what would happen if we incorporated these practices into any mundane and typical family meal – consistent reminders of all we are blessed with. I also wonder about the power of that simple gratitude – those common seasonal blessings we each experience yet often overlook. Those things we experience as we engage with our senses – the smell of snow or of fallen leaves, the feel of that crisp, newly chilly air forcing us to take refuge in hats and scarves, the taste of pumpkins or apples or grains. How does engaging with gratitude, big and small, change us? When we engage with the world and our surroundings in such an intentional way, we are consistently drawn to that which we can appreciate – we change our orientation with

the world. We are surrounded by those tiny things that can evoke a sacred thanks within us in each moment of each day.

Why do we join together today to share our stories, stories of seemingly unremarkable grains? We are able to find the wisdom in the common, to create community by that ancient practice of sharing sustenance, to turn strangers into acquaintances and acquaintances into friends and friends into family as we are drawn closer together by the primitive act of storytelling. We are able to evoke the ancestors as we share that recipe that was passed through the generations brought to this unique moment our faith tradition offers us. In learning from each other we learn from those we will never meet; we garner wisdom from generations of lessons steeped in experiences of faith or culture or family. That is the transformational art of storytelling. Our circle widens, our connections strengthen, our pool of wisdom deepens. Unleavened bread becomes a story of escape. Biscuits become a tale of impoverished ancestors merely surviving. Banana bread becomes a reminder of love, connecting us to generations of love as great grandmother shared with grandmother shared with mother shared with us. Story telling has connected communities for millennia – it is an ancient practice. Sacred texts offer a wealth of stories. Jesus himself spoke in parables. I know we each have wisdom tales that are meaningful to us – this creates beloved community, this day, and every day. Let's bring this gift of sharing with each other into each of our days! For each narrative – each anecdote – that's a blessing.

If we engage with that fundamental element of any harvest festival, celebrations which span time and cultures, we create community by sharing that which we reap in abundance – communities traditionally sharing with one another corn or wheat or yams – freshly harvested food. This is what we celebrate today. It is a time to be reminded of the importance of service and justice and creating heaven on earth – bringing food to every aching stomach and wounded soul. What can we offer? While many of us live in suburbia or the outskirts of Baltimore, we do not have a harvest to share. But we do have resources to share whether we have excess in abundance or live in a state of scarcity. Perhaps we can share money, perhaps an excess of food. We can donate our time. We can share genuine compassion to those who could be

termed the least of these – treating those who are hungry with kindness and respect. Perhaps we can share a prayer with an aching soul. We are communal beings; we do not do well in isolation. These acts of giving and receiving create community. Through sharing with one another, whether exchanging wisdom stories or tangible resources – we connect people of all generations, of all economic statuses, of all faiths and cultures and families.

We each have more than enough of something. The middle-class and wealthy have food and funds and can provide those necessary, tangible things to those who have less. But I wonder what else we can have more than enough of. Those who lack wealth but are blessed with an excess of compassion. Those with or without means with an excess of humor. Or elders with an excess of wisdom. Each of these things – love and laughter and deep insight – are also necessary in our individual quests for lives of meaning. We each have something precious to share. I think of those at the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless where I served as a chaplain – working intimately with those whose wealth of resources were far from an abundance of disposable income or nourishment, but who still had a wealth of precious resources to share. Often, I gained more from them than they could ever gain from me. Everywhere I turned were stories of survival – people with an excess of strength and determination and compassion. I witnessed and heard stories of small yet profound acts of generosity – steeped in that excess that those with more wealth may overlook – gifts of a candy bar, or of a short recitation of scripture. Generosity is not measured in amount, but in the heart and soul and selflessness offered by the gift. Gratitude is not measured by monetary increments but by the vulnerability in fully accepting that which was offered with true joy and grace.

When we share, what are our intentions? I wonder about the power of selfless giving – giving for no other reason than for other’s lives to be improved in some shape or form. Not for our own benefit, we let love and goodness ripple out. We can care for strangers as if they were woven into the fabric of our own families. The understanding of self, of “I,” so predominant in the culture of this country, becomes a beloved, “we.” Strangers become acquaintances become

friends become family – the path towards intimacy traveled by beloveds in our midst.  
Intentional living, sharing, gratitude – this changes us!

Amidst oak trees, buzzing insects, poems and humble embraces, poet Chris Jimmerson asks, “Who am I not to surrender to it in gratitude? Who am I not to be blessed?”<sup>1</sup> I believe gratitude is an acknowledgement of blessings. I believe we can each be changed into more compassionate, joyful, appreciative people if we steep ourselves in appreciation for ordinary blessings. These unassuming blessings often arise when we deeply engage with our senses. The poet who heard humming insects, who felt the warmth of a beloved’s hug felt blessed.<sup>2</sup> Even in the ordinary space I found myself in while writing this sermon I was surrounded by small blessings – the warmth and bitterness in my coffee, the fallen leaves spread on the ground outside of my window, my favorite novels that lined the bookshelves beside me. I think of the unassuming blessings of this season. A crackling fire keeping us warm. Sweet cider on our tongues. The beauty of a cloud of breath rising in the frozen air. I think of intentionally changing the way we engage with this world in noticing those ordinary blessings. And I am curious how we can change a nuisance to a blessing. Is snow only something to be shoveled and plowed, or is it a culmination of thousands of tiny little pieces of art? I remember living in Minnesota, where the cold was so fierce it hurt my face. I could focus on the pain, or I could focus on that unique opportunity to actually feel my nose, cheeks, and lips. What can we be grateful for now, in this moment, in this sacred time of sharing nourishment and sharing story? What blessings can we find in each and every moment?

I think of other profound blessings: the beloveds in our midst. Blessings come when we offer genuine care for one another, when a sibling offers unexpected words of praise, or a father brings soup to a daughter who is grieving. Simple gratitude – found in a hot cup of tea graciously offered when we are cold or sad, or a look of compassion in another’s eyes. Blessings are when we offer deep gratitude for who each person is, not for whom we

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<sup>1</sup> “Who Am I Not to Be Blessed?” By Chris Jimmerson

<sup>2</sup> ibid

wish them to be. For their gifts, not their growing edges. We are surrounded by people for whom we can offer thanks.

I return to the onset of stresses introduced with the celebration of Thanksgiving, and remind us all of the words of Rev. Jen Bailey, “And I wonder, particularly in a time where everything seems urgent, what the role of pause and breath is, in this.”<sup>3</sup> What part of life is enhanced by this panicked rush? This cultural need to get things done consistently faster and better. What is genuinely urgent, in this upcoming month, in buying the perfect gift or providing just the right holiday meal? Let us breathe! Let us pause and appreciate and give thanks for each moment just as it is. In just breathing, we have a moment to connect with all we hold within, to connect beyond to all we hold sacred, and to connect, in some small way, to the web of life of which we are all a part. In each day of any month this pause can ease us and remind us of the refuge of silence and the blessings of calmly being. Right now, we can surpass the pressures the holiday season can evoke and interact with our sacred, our holy, our community instead. Let us bask in blessings.

So, how can we be changed by gratitude? We give thanks in each moment for those little things that inevitably surround us. We focus on that which causes delight, not on that which causes pain. We receive what others so selflessly offer with genuine thanks, noticing gifts shared with true generosity. We become givers of gifts as well. How can we be changed by intentionally sharing our grain dishes? Each story we tell is filled with wisdom of the ancestors, of guidance and spiritual nourishment. Our stories deepen our connections and our appreciation for the life experiences of one another. To share a story is to offer a gift. To receive it is to be steeped in gratitude. May we each be steeped in gratitude.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2022-2023*

