

Living Out of Gratitude

Thanksgiving & Bread Communion Service

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

At first glance, it was just a big box.

But, on closer inspection, it became clear that it was actually an old steamer trunk—covered in grime, with leather handles that crumbled into dust when touched.

The trunk sat in a basement closet that housed the steam works that heated Boston’s Arlington Street Church, the Unitarian congregation where I served as administrator and was later ordained.

On my first day as administrator, my predecessor showed me around the building.

After we inspected the various valves that tied into the city’s steam lines, he motioned to the corner and said that the box there contained the congregation’s collection of communion silver.

He explained that it had been appraised once-upon-a-time, but that it wasn’t of much value.

The congregation hadn’t used the silver in decades.

The last time any one could recall seeing it was a service in the late ‘60s when young American men burned their draft cards in the old silver goblets to protest the war in Vietnam.

In the decades in-between, the silver had simply been collecting dust.

As soon as my predecessor left the building,

the bookkeeper and I made our way to the closet,
hailed out the great trunk, and, because the keys were long lost,
pried it open so that we could take a look.

Out of old, red flannel bags, we pulled piece after piece of colonial-era silver.

Great tankards, a christening bowl, a spoon, and simple collection plates.

And then I pulled out a beautiful, simple beaker.

I turned it over and said to my partner-in-crime:
“mine says ‘Revere’ what does yours say?”

There were three of these beakers, which turned out to be the earliest commissioned pieces
by the great Boston silversmith and American patriot Paul Revere.

With the help of experts in the field,
we soon learned that this neglected trunk was a treasure chest.

Over the next several months, the congregation debated what to do
with these incredibly valuable objects—
so valuable that it was no longer wise to even store them in the building.

Some of this silver had been held in trust by the congregation for almost three centuries.

It was our heritage, in beautiful, tangible form,
though it would almost certainly never be used again
for the exact purpose for which it was created.

The congregation had taken down the cross in the sanctuary in the 60s
and hadn’t thought of themselves as Christian for a very long time.

Eventually, the congregation voted to sell the silver.

Bob and I and several members of the congregation made the trip down
to Christie’s Auction House in Manhattan for the sale.

It was riveting. And bittersweet.

In a few short minutes, a collection that had taken centuries to amass was sold to the highest bidder.

The good news is that the most valuable pieces, including the three beakers by Paul Revere, are now on display in great museums for all to see.

The proceeds helped the congregation to finally fund the first major renovation of the sanctuary in ninety years, replacing broken pews and cushions last stuffed with horse hair. Plaster was repaired, Tiffany windows restored, and the whole sanctuary painted for the first time in almost a century.

By returning the building to its former glory, the congregation found a fitting way to honour the legacy of those who had come before.

But, there has always been, and likely will forever be, some part of me that wishes we had held on to the silver—because it is ultimately a piece of the story of our faith.

It often comes as a surprise to our modern sensibilities, but Unitarians have long celebrated communion.

As dissenters from the Church of England, our Puritan forebears in England and Ireland, as well as those who first came to North America, still took communion.

But, there has rarely been consensus amongst us, at least for very long, as to what precisely communion means.

Centuries ago, when those silver beakers were created, there was quite an obsession among Puritans as to who was worthy to receive “the Lord’s Supper” and who was not.

By 1790, the Universalist side of our tradition recognized that there was such a diversity of opinion about communion that they declared it no longer obligatory.

It took the Unitarian side of our family longer to reach that view.

In 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson left his church and the Unitarian ministry after explaining to his congregation that he could simply no longer administer communion in good faith.

Still, from then until now, even as our tradition grew beyond Christianity, communion has continued to be celebrated, in some places routinely, in others sporadically, and in others, never at all.

From what I can tell, our congregation has celebrated bread communion off and on for most of our history.

The ritual has evolved well beyond our Christian roots, and that is as it should be, I believe, as there has long been a religious impulse to create symbolic, ritual meals—from the Passover seder of the Jews to the god-shaped bread of the Aztecs, from the Shinto feast of naorai to the high drama of the Christian Eucharist.

But, the tradition, of course, goes back even farther, to a recognition by our ancient ancestors of that most basic fact of life—that we depend, quite literally, on the bounty of the earth for sustenance, and that we depend, so often, on others, and some would say God, for our very survival.

When we know that—when we truly know it in our bones—I find that it is gratitude and generosity that stirs in our hearts.

I know because I've felt it in my own life, and I know, because I've seen it captured in silver.

There was a lovely chalice in Arlington Street Church's collection crafted by Jacob Hurd in 1730, the year after the congregation was founded.

The chalice is of great value to the outside world because Hurd made a name for himself as one of the great silversmiths of the early 18th century, but what I cherished most about that particular chalice was its inscription:

*The gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Nicholls for the Use of the Church. . .
In Remembrance of God's wonderful mercies to Her in a strange Land.*

She was not a wealthy woman. Her husband was a tailor.
Together, they left behind a modest list of assets when they died.

But, she was moved out of gratitude, some 20 years before her death,
to give thanks for the blessings of her life
in this new world so far from her the land of her birth.

How I would love to meet Mrs. Nicholls today—
to let her know that that chalice she surely sacrificed to have made,
has served her congregation well for centuries.

That it nourished generations of people as they shared communion,
that it gave new life to the church's home in 2001,
and that it lives today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston
as an enduring tribute to her gratitude and generosity.

Her story touches me because I think we're all strangers in a strange land, sometimes,
dependent on mercies we can scarcely see.

And her story touches me because it points to that fundamental vulnerability we all share—
the fragility at the heart of being human—
that calls us to true communion—
that calls us to respond with generosity and gratitude.

One of my favourite images of such communion is captured in the movie *Babette's Feast*,
so beautifully described by Nora Gallagher.¹

The movie tells the story of two sisters:

living alone in a remote coastal village in northern Norway.
They are in their middle age, good women.
Their idea of a [decent] meal is a piece of salted cod.
Their father, a pastor has died; their church community dwindles
and grows gossipy and backstabbing.

Enter into this scene, Babette, a French refugee.
She offers to cook for them in exchange for room and board.

¹ Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal*, pp. 78-80.

For fourteen years, Babette cooks salted cod,
ale soup with bread, but with her own special touch.

Her only contact with France is a once-a-year splurge:
she buys a lottery ticket by mail.

One day a letter arrives for Babette. [And,] you guessed it.
She's won ten thousand francs,
enough to pay her passage home and [to] live on once she arrives.

Babette asks her benefactors if she might cook one last meal,
a dinner for twelve at her [own] expense.

Cages of quail arrive from France;
wine, cheeses, fresh eggs and butter and herbs.
The sisters begin to panic: what to do with such extravagance?
Such excess?

The day of the feast [arrives, at last].

Babette sets the table with fine linens and candles, crystal and china.

And the guests arrive—most of them the bickering churchgoers,
and there is also a French general,
a former suitor of one of the sisters. . . .

The eyes [of everyone around the table] widen as they begin to eat.

For some, the sips of champagne are the first of a lifetime.
The general exclaims over the quail baked in a pastry shell,
and the wonderful cheeses: "Surely, this food is exactly like a meal
I once had at Chez Angelique, in Paris."

"Its chef was the only woman chef in all of France."

As they eat and drink, their smiles begin [to broaden].

For some, it is the first time they've eaten really good food

in a whole lifetime of deprivation.

Hesitantly, and then with more gusto, they begin to talk.

One man opens a sore subject with another,

“you cheated me,” he says calmly.

“Yes, I did,” replies the other.

“Oh, well,” the first man responds. “I cheated you, too.”

And they shake hands.

Two women who have gossiped rudely about each other throughout their lives smile warmly at each other and lift their glasses in a toast.

And as the coffee and dessert are laid on the table, with more champagne, the general lifts his glass to the whole community.

“Mercy is infinite,” he says. “All that we need is given to us.”

At the end of the film, we discover that Babette, of course, was the chef at Chez Angélique, [the restaurant in Paris], but the greater surprise is she is not leaving after all.

Why not?

Because a meal for twelve at Chez Angélique costs ten thousand francs.

Babette has given them everything.

And this may be the final reason the dinner was so transforming: it was given with complete generosity, with nothing held back.

Babette knew how to say thanks.

She was a stranger in a strange land,
and she had found that mercy is, indeed, infinite.

Later today and into tomorrow, with family and friends,
we will gather around tables laden with food,
and we will give thanks for the mercies of this life.

Whether we call it communion or not, it is a ritual meal.

(It you're not convinced, just try serving up spaghetti instead. . .)

It is a meal filled with meaning.

So, while we're getting our fill of mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce,
somewhere in the blessed mix of it all,
I hope there will come a moment, for each of you,
when gratitude enters in—gratitude for the great gift of life itself.

Amen.