

“The Healing Grace of Gratitude”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Thanksgiving

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.

In this season, on this day,
all about us are the sure signs of harvest, of fulfilment,
of the earth’s bounty come forth, once again,
to nurture and sustain us.

Even from here, in the sanctuary,
we can savour the aroma wafting down from upstairs,
where tables laden with the traditional foods of Thanksgiving
await our growing appetites.

All about us are the sure signs of life’s abundance,
in the colourful gourds popping up everywhere,
in apples recently picked and baked,
in vegetables freshly gathered and cooked,
in everything harvested in this season,
in this grand and thrilling act of creation come once again.

And amid this season, as the harvest is brought in,
we are called to a feast, called to a feast day.

We are called to a day of Thanksgiving, to give thanks—
for the earth’s gifts, for life’s blessings, for all that we have, and all that we are.

But, truth be told, Thanksgiving doesn’t always work out
in such a straightforward way.

In our very urban lives, the surest signs of the season are felt
not as we look out over fields of plenty and overflowing orchards,
but, more often, in the crush of shopping carts at the supermarket,
the long lines at the LCBO,

and the heavy traffic snaking slowly up to cottage country.

In all of this,
far from feelings of autumnal bliss,
far removed from feelings of deep gratitude,
we may find ourselves quite irritable, instead,
and not at all thankful on Thanksgiving.

This is, of course, a problem.
It doesn't follow the script.
It doesn't fit the narrative that surrounds this holiday.

No one really wants to feel ungrateful on Thanksgiving.
Or on any day, I would venture.

And, yet it happens:
on holidays, and holy days, and regular, run-of-the-mill days, too.

We're just not feeling it.
We're not filled with gratitude.
We don't give thanks, and we don't give it a second thought.

It may not be that we're ungrateful, per se,
but indifference can mean much the same thing.

Sure, we know, we're supposed to be thankful—for food, and friends, and family.
For life's blessings, for "all that is our life."

You can't be grateful because you're supposed to.

As any parent of a five-year old can tell you, you can't demand gratitude.
You can insist all day long that children mind their manners and say, "thank you."
But you cannot conjure up gratitude through coercion or command.
Repeating the words "thank you" a thousand times
won't change the heart of someone not feeling it, at least not immediately.

I know this, because I once was five, and ungrateful.

I was visiting my grandparents for a few days.
It was a Saturday.

My grandmother had gone out to run errands, and visit the beauty parlour,
which was, as it may sound, a very involved, hours-long affair in the American South.

My grandfather was left to cook breakfast for the kids.

His first mistake, from my point of view,
was failing to consult with me about my dietary preferences.

Had he done so, he would have quickly learned
that I hated eggs and loathed tomato juice even more.

Yet, that was exactly what was on offer that morning:
a heaping plate of scrambled eggs
and the largest glass of tomato juice I have ever seen.
Breakfast from hell.

I was quick to notify my grandfather of my concerns,
explaining I wouldn't be eating the eggs or drinking the juice.

And he, with a warmth honed over his long military career,
was quick to tell me that I would.
He added that I should be more grateful.

So began an epic stand-off that would last for hours.

He made clear I would be sitting at the breakfast table
until I had eaten everything on my plate and downed all the juice.

And so sat there, I did.
As my brothers finished their food.
As my grandfather washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen.
As my brothers watched Saturday morning cartoons on television.
And as my brothers later ran by on their way outdoors to play.

By this time, hunger had seriously set in.
But so had my will.

I was determined to stick it out,
even though I knew my means of escape had been,
quite literally, served up on a plate before me.

That the eggs had grown cold and the juice reached room temperature did little to add to their appeal.

I stoically resolved to serve out my terrible sentence, suffering in silence.

Or, to be honest, I simply hoped my grandmother would return soon enough to free me from this cruel and miserable fate.

Late in the afternoon,
with the last of the sun shining low through the windows,
she finally returned home.

In the end, my imprisonment ended with a whimper.

She seemed a bit upset I had been at the table all day.
But I wasn't sure if she was angry with me or with my grandfather.

And, then, in a sudden moment of grace,
she simply called me over to help prepare dinner
as a way of commuting my sentence.

I'm not sure I learned my lesson or any lesson that particular day.

I certainly failed to understand what my grandfather
was trying to teach me about gratitude.

But in the years since, I have looked back on that day many times.

I have wondered about how he and I
might have played out that scenario in a different way.

I have wondered about other times
when I've been so stubborn that I've missed out on life's blessings,
let alone been able to give thanks for them.

I have come to see that I missed appreciating the gifts that were on offer that day—
not so much the eggs and juice—
but the gift of my grandfather in the kitchen, cooking up a meal,
as best he knew how, with love.

All of this really only became clear to me when I was in my mid-twenties.

I saw my grandfather for the first time in a long time.

At a family gathering, Vidalia onions were served as a side dish.
They were delicious, and I said so, apparently within his hearing.

A couple of weeks later, back at home,
a hefty, heavy box arrived on my doorstep.

Before I even opened it, I had a strong sense of what was inside.
I suspect every mail carrier between my house and Georgia, with one whiff,
also knew what was inside.

Onions. A half bushel of them. Almost thirty-pounds worth.

Though I lived half-way across the country,
my grandfather had shipped me a big box of onions.
Because he heard me say that I liked them.

Though there were many more onions than I could possibly eat,
I felt deep gratitude for the love each and every one of those onions represented.

My grandfather and I never talked about the eggs or the onions,
aside from my sending a thank you note.

But I will always be grateful for the lessons about gratitude and grace
he took twenty years to teach me.

Through bowl after bowl after bowl of French Onion Soup,
a broken place in our relationship was healed.

I thought back to that box of onions yesterday
when I came across Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, "The Traveling Onion."

When I think how far the onion has traveled
Just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise
All small forgotten miracles,
Crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,
Pearly layers in smooth agreement,
The way knife enters onion
And onion falls apart on the chopping block,

A history revealed.

And I would never scold the onion
For causing tears.
It is right that tears fall
For something small and forgotten.
How at [a] meal, we sit to eat,
Commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma
But never on the translucence of onion,
Now limp, now divided,
Or its traditionally honorable career:
For the sake of others,
[to] Disappear.

This world, this life, this day
is filled with miracles that sustain our very being.
Gifts ignored or invisible, gifts translucent to the eye.

Gifts we didn't do anything to earn.
Gifts we've done nothing to deserve.

Quite simply, gifts of grace, seen and unseen, great and small,
that make possible who we are,
and everything we know of what it means to be alive on this good green earth.

There is a grandeur to this glorious fact—
this essential fact of our existence—
that, if and when we dare to see it,
has the power to humble the heart and move it towards gratitude.

This isn't always as easy as it arguably should be.

We can refuse to see, turning aside wonder and awe.
We can resist acknowledging the miracles that give shape to our daily lives,
taking far too much credit for our own well-being,
taking far too much for granted that it shall ever be thus.

That's why the central sin behind ingratitude isn't ambivalence, but arrogance.

Arrogance rooted in the false notion that we are fully self-sufficient.

That we are independent and self-made.
That we have only ourselves to thank for our life's good fortune.

This is why there's a very real element of risk involved
in paying heed to the grace that unfolds in our lives.

For it reminds us that we live in webs of interdependence,
that we ultimately depend on the enduring grace that carries us through this life.

This grace is encountered in countless ways.
It is known to us by many different names, some sacred and some less so.

But when we truly see it, when we know it in our bones,
when we come to honour and celebrate it,
we cannot help but to do so with thanksgiving,
with gratitude "for all that is our life."

This Thanksgiving, that is my prayer for you.

That you may be always on the lookout
for the miracles that sustain your life.

That you may bask in them with wonder and awe, for the great gifts that they are.

And that you may hear, again and again,
the call of your heart to respond with gratitude
to the grace that abides in eggs and in onions,
in the love of family and friends,
in the air that we breathe and the sun that warms,
in "the Life that enfolds us and helps, and heals, and holds us."

May it be so.

Amen.

Benediction

In closing, I leave you these words of blessing,
these words of grace,

this prayer for all of our tables,
today and tomorrow, and every day.

“Grace” - Rafael Jesus Gonzalez

Thanks & blessings be
to the Sun & the Earth...
this fruit, this meat, this salt, this food;
thanks be & blessing to them
who prepare it, who serve it;
thanks & blessings to them
who share it
(& also the absent & the dead).

Thanks & Blessing to them who bring it
(may they not want),
to them who plant & tend it,
harvest & gather it
(may they not want);

thanks & blessing to them who work
& blessing to them who cannot;
may they not want - for their hunger
sours the wine & robs
the taste from the salt.

Thanks be for the sustenance & strength
for our dance & work of justice, of peace.

And let us all say, “Amen.”

Happy Thanksgiving!