

**A Holiday for All
Thanksgiving Sermon 2007
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My family has been in this country for many generations. The most recent immigrants on any branch are four or five generations ago. And we can trace ourselves back, I've heard it said, to that next boat—the one no one remembers—after the Mayflower. So you might think Thanksgiving would be a fairly important, traditional, ritualistic holiday for us. The truth is, we've had many different types of Thanksgivings, many of them unique. There's the one I told you about a few years ago with my uncle and the potato gun. But there's also the year we had Thanksgiving at the nursing home with my Aunt 'Bel, and the year we had Thanksgiving at the hospital. Not because anyone we knew was sick, but because we knew that it would be an inexpensive place to go, and that they would have Turkey, and they would be open. Many Thanksgivings, though, were the traditional one you'd think of, often spent with extended family up in Big Rapids. I can remember one Thanksgiving with a lot of snow where my cousins and I built a snow fort and had a big snowball fight.

So Thanksgiving is an important holiday, yes, for us. But Thanksgiving isn't just for us, for families that go back to the first boats in the "New Land." Thanksgiving is for all Americans, as our story told us. One of my best friends is a second generation German-American. She told me that her family, with her German parents, has never really done Thanksgiving. They usually have spent it with other American friends, at the friends' houses, so they've never really done the family meal on their own. This year they're doing it at her new house, and so she is, I think, really cooking Thanksgiving dinner for the first time. And they're doing some things differently. Nobody there really likes turkey, for example. And the dinner will likely include some ethnic traditions from her German family, and her brother's wife's Asian Indian family. I joke with my husband about how his Irish family always includes, at their Thanksgiving, the traditional Irish dish of ravioli, but that's because it's brought by a member of the family who is Italian. So every family incorporates new things into their holiday and makes it theirs, yet it retains some of those traditional American elements, as well.

I heard a Muslim person, who was a newer immigrant, asked recently if he celebrates Thanksgiving. His answer was, "As Muslims, we thank God every day." Certainly I think that the giving of thanks is an important part of Thanksgiving. But I think it's about more than that. It's about what we're specifically giving thanks for. And while we often stop to think on all of our blessings, the story of the first Thanksgiving has a message for all of us about what the ritual of this holiday is all about.

In Unitarian Universalist circles, there has been a big debate about something called the "Thanksgiving Seder." It's a ritualized meal done in the church that uses the format of the Passover Seder, which celebrates the escape out of Egypt of the Jewish people, but the Thanksgiving Seder uses that format of the Seder meal to tell the story of the pilgrims. It's controversial about whether or not this is an appropriate cultural borrowing. But I think the meal gets at a truth about this holiday: it's a holiday for all of us; it's a holiday about our exodus, the ways in which our people, each and every one, escaped bondage, slavery, or religious or political oppression, and came to a new land. For descendants of pilgrims, the story goes back to that first Thanksgiving, but for others, it is the story of how their people escaped Nazi persecution, or escaped from political oppression in China, or left famine in Ireland, or how their people left

apartheid, genocide, or political persecution. It's the story of leaving home, leaving country, and coming to something new, searching for a better life. For African Americans, who came over here in bondage, it's a story, too, of the escape from slavery to make this a new country, a better country, and the thanks we give for leaving the ways of oppression and bondage behind.

Of course, this understanding of Thanksgiving doesn't fit one important segment of our population, Native Americans. And many Native Americans find Thanksgiving, like Columbus Day, to be a time of mourning, for the country that was once theirs is not just theirs anymore. They were pushed and dragged across the country and given small plots of land, often far from the land that they knew. They were systematically repressed through the Indian schools which sought to break their culture by raising the children without it.

I can't pretend to know what it is like to be a Native American. I can't presume to say that Thanksgiving shouldn't be a time of sorrow. And I think for the rest of us, too, we need to remember this on this holiday. That when those first people, some of them my people, came to this land, they escaped religious persecution and they became religious persecutors. They burnt witches at the stake, they slaughtered Native Americans, they enslaved Africans, and they made this country theirs through the sword and the gun. All of that is our sorrow that we share on Thanksgiving, too. We give Thanks for the hope that each new day can mean an end to oppression, that we are always learning, moving forward, and that our learning enables us to break the cycles of the past.

Thanksgiving is a time when we must recognize all the stories that make up the story of our country, and give thanks for the various ways in which they have found their freedom. And the stories of the bondage and the wrongs they've escaped from must be told, too, even if those oppressions were at the hands of our own country and its citizens as well. It's a complicated history, not a pure one. To celebrate this holiday in its entirety, we must acknowledge the diversity of America, each new wave of immigrants and their stories, and the stories of the First Nations people as well.

There are people coming right now to America to make a new start. Some will come on student visas, some will come crossing borders illegally, some will have married an American, some will come seeking asylum, some will be coming over as workers in a new job. Each of them has their story of hardship, of why they've chosen to seek out our country. I'm not often patriotic in the sense of being proud to be an American. It's an accident of birth that I happen to be an American, and I did nothing, personally, to deserve it. But I am proud of our country at times. I was proud of my country when this past spring my sister's husband chose to get sworn in and become an American. I was proud that after several years here he had found that this was something worthwhile, something he wanted to belong to. I'm proud of our country when we live up to the words on the Statue of Liberty, the poem "New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

We are at our best when we live out the ideal of the land of the free and a refuge for those tired, hungry, poor.

Thanksgiving is about abundance. This is the land of plenty. We have resources here beyond our imagining. I know that in this country, in this county we have homelessness, poverty, hunger, unemployment. I know we struggle economically and we see the dreams of the

past slipping away. But part of why we are at this point in our country is because we haven't been listening to the story of Thanksgiving. We have been living in the model of scarcity. Thanksgiving is about abundance. The story, the mythical story of Thanksgiving is that mythical story we do hear in Exodus—that the people came to the promised land, and they grumbled, and looked about them, and complained about the lack of food, but God provided manna from heaven. The story of Thanksgiving is about how there was hunger and struggle and famine, and yet the people sat down and gave thanks that they survived, gave thanks for what they had, and they shared it, the pilgrims and the Native Americans together. The story of Thanksgiving, like Passover, is always about the empty chair, because there's room for one more at the table. There's always room for one more refugee to exit out of Egypt or England or Mexico or Darfur and come to this land.

Too often lately we hear people worrying about illegal immigrants. People are worried that there isn't enough to go around here, that the illegal immigrants are taking jobs away from someone more deserving, an American. At Thanksgiving we must remember that the Pilgrims were the first illegal immigrants. Nobody here asked them to come here, they didn't ask permission to come in. And yet this became a home. We also want to restrict immigration to people who come here with large resources—be it money or education—because, again, we think otherwise they're taking away resources from those already here. But those waves of immigration that made up our past, those of us who are Irish or German or Polish, those of us who are Asian or African or anything else, these people came to America over the centuries of our country's history because they searched for something better—freedom, opportunity. Immigrants are our truest Americans, in some ways, because they are the ones who came because of love for this country or hunger for it. They are the ones who came because of the dream of what America could be, if we lived up to our ideals. Those of us who have always called ourselves Americans, born here and raised here, we aren't people who can have the pride of being an American because becoming one was an accomplishment. It was an accident of birth. We are default Americans, and yes, true Americans, but the immigrants are true Americans too, because they are living our history, becoming our dream, celebrating our values of freedom and democracy.

There are times when we look at what our nation is in this world, and we feel sorrow or frustration. There are times when we shine with pride. To be an American is to live in this complex place. Fraught with trouble as this history is, it is still our history, our story of struggle and freedom, of promise and providence. In our faith, in this liberal religion, we know what it is to celebrate that our strength comes from diversity. We know what it is to be a religion and fight for religious freedom. We know what it is to love who we are and struggle against the oppression still within the system. It is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists, just as our history is, too, woven into the history of this country, from the founding fathers who were members of our faith to the individual people sitting in our pews today who still make their mark on the shape of this country. And so we offer up thanks this day—for who we are, for who we were, and for who we can be in this land of plenty, this land of freedom.

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