



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Give Thanks

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

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For generations, Americans have been gathering for the harvest festival of Thanksgiving, a time for being together, feasting, and expressing gratitude. And, of course, for many, football!! It is a particular blessing to gather together as a community for our own celebrations before we head to our respective tables. Thanksgiving is a holiday not dedicated to any singular religious story, but many think of it as celebrating the holy trinity of food, family and football!

Today's Thanksgiving, like our nation, reflects the multiplicities of our cultural traditions, each one reflected at the Thanksgiving table. While I am usually a key architect of my family's Thanksgiving dinner, this year I will happily be a guest at my New York family's table. Over the years, living in different places I've often had the occasion of being a guest. It's been fascinating to experience how every table is different. Whether you prefer cornbread dressing or oyster stuffing, pumpkin pie or sweet potato, everyone has a special recipe, many with stories connected to our cultural or family histories.

Many of us have strong preferences for our own family traditions. I remember attending a Thanksgiving table in Minnesota several years back. My mother, always the host, rarely the guest, was taken aback when she learned there would be no sweet cranberry sauce at the table, only a tart blend of cranberries, lemons and limes as was their tradition. After the meal we talked about the feelings that came up for us around sharing another family's table. We were a bit surprised to discover how ungrateful we could feel in the absence of a simple but familiar item. It seemed to distract us from an entire table of beautifully prepared food.

Since the ancient times, families and communities have gathered to celebrate the harvest by offering gratitude to the earth and to God, understood as the creator of the universe. There is no other place that represents the goodness and abundance of life than the feast. The feast celebrates the land which hosts harvest, the miracle that from tiny seeds comes the bounty that sustains life, brought forth by the cooperative work of many hands in many seasons. The feast was the hallmark of gratitude for a good harvest, and a prayer of faithfulness that the harvest would last over the long winter.

The origins of the first American Thanksgiving have as many stories as ways to stuff a turkey. No less than five states—Massachusetts, Florida, Texas, Maine, and Virginia all declare themselves to be the site of the first Thanksgiving dating back to the early 17th century. By some accounts, Thanksgiving was a simple, non-religious harvest gathering of the Puritans modeled on the British Harvest Home festivals, celebrated throughout. Other stories describe the Spanish Catholics creating a religious service of Thanksgiving followed by a shared meal. Far before colonial contact with the New World, Native peoples indigenous to the Eastern Woodlands celebrated harvest times with gatherings of feasting that stretched for many days. Perhaps the most well-known account of the first Thanksgiving is the story of how the Pilgrim

settlers joined with the Wampanoag peoples for three days of feasting at Plymouth, Massachusetts.

What these differing stories tell us is that Thanksgiving has no one story, just as the holiday has no one way to celebrate it. We can assume that those first gathered communities had experienced real scarcity and suffering in daily life, and needed a reminder of their common humanity and mutual interests. The American tradition of feasting we continue today was born out of a need to bring together a community, often in conflict with one another and who had caused one another harm.

The Thanksgiving table, throughout history and today, kindles the belief in an abundant world, that what we have, even if very little, is not to be hoarded but to be shared generously with others. Feasting, sharing food and drink and expressing gratitude has the power to create unity and to bridge differences, if even just for the span of a meal. Today, we need a sense of national unity more than ever. Our country, a nation of immigrants, is rife with political divides made even more visible in the reaction to the terrorist attacks in Paris, Baghdad, Beirut, Nigeria and Mali. This week's hateful comments from state governors and aspiring presidential candidates heighten the need for a call to unity at every level, especially for us as people of faith. We need to stand with our Muslim friends in faith, near and far. We need to say boldly that our city, our state and our country are meant to be safe places for refugees, immigrants, especially those fleeing a homeland ruined by terrorism.

I wonder too if we can begin practicing that unity in small ways too. A place to start for some of us might be our own Thanksgiving tables. Friday night, I rode home in an Uber from the airport. The driver shared his excitement and his nervousness at going home to his family in Louisiana. He used the word battleground to describe how his table might feel as he confronted the very real religious and political differences present in his family.

For many people, the Thanksgiving table can feel like this: an intimate battleground on which the real conflicts present in our world are played out. The choice many make is to avoid difficult conversations altogether, focusing on easier topics like food and football. But if this describes your table, might you use it as an opportunity, to listen deeply, discover shared gratitude and mutual interest in working towards common ground to create a world you want to live in? And for those present at your Thanksgiving tables who already share values with you, might you use it as an opportunity to share your thoughts and feelings in a safe space. Might your tables be places articulate your beliefs more clearly to gather the courage to amplify them in the world?

Thanksgiving isn't only about retreating to our respective tables, cooking our favorite foods and giving thanks for our own comfort. Thanksgiving calls to community on an intimate and a national level to kindle our larger sense of gratitude and to call us to unity. It's often said that it's easy to tap into gratitude when everything is going well. But the most crucial times in our lives to uncover gratitude are when things are difficult, overwhelming or painful.

The practice of naming moments of joy and gladness, small or large, reminds us that what is universally good and beautiful endures in the world in spite of suffering and conflict. From a place of gratitude we can be emboldened to respond to our world's challenges with a faith in humankind that triumphs over fear. Each day, with its dreams and disappointments, its celebrations and sorrows, can be a day for our gladness at sharing the simple gift of being alive with those we love. May you have a wonderful holiday, however you celebrate it. And may you find yourselves overflowing with gratitude for the gifts in your lives.