

**Opening Words**

We are here  
*as the gold of high autumn gives way*  
to the cold and grey of winter  
*to worship, to remember that we share a world*  
and do not have to face our troubles alone;  
*to rejoice that even though both joy and sorrow*  
claim our hearts, gratitude can strengthen us.

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

**Affirming      At this time, we have more for which to be grateful than we will ever know. So let us set aside our shopping list of grievances, and instead, want what we have. And if our lives hurt, may we remember to want nothing more than the affection of those whose hearts are broken by our pain. Let us do what we can, dreaming one possible dream, climbing one splendid mountain, that our lives may be blessed with attainable meaning. And let us be who we are, answering the call that is ours, not another's.**

*Rev. Forrest Church (edited for this service), 2008*

**Sequence    *Images before the silence***

Kernels of grain in the ground. Ant cities near by, their freeways tunneling through the soil. Mold, pebbles, white roots from a nearby weed. The sound of Flight 187 from Cleveland to Memphis 38,000 feet overhead, sending down slight echoes of the broken air that are felt by few, except a few sensitive earthworms.....

Green shoots in late spring. An almost-famous poet drives past, notices the blue sky against the green field and jots down a few notes for a future verse about her relationship with her mother, a notable farm-house cook. A lone falcon hovers over an invisible mouse amid all those stalks.....

Bronze grain waving in the breeze. The great red machines rumbling, one driver reflecting on the economic downturn, another composing a letter to his nephew attending school in Cuernavaca... A yellow glass bowl of grain grown from that kernel, in that field, ground into soft flour, mixed with yeast and water and salt, rising into air already breathed in and out a thousand times, over a thousand years, by a thousand human beings all around the world. Bread. Filled with memories and poems, sounds and cities, stories and salt, tangled with the whole abundant cornucopia of the earth, including, I suppose, this very silence.

*silence*

Memories in the heart. The men and women and children in our lives, here or far, alive or not, rising within us, a harvest of love. Let us thank them for how their lives, joined to ours, brought us to this day. We name them, quietly inside, or spoken in air, but we do not move through the rest of the service without joining hands with them and acknowledging their part in all this....

*naming*

Thanksgiving rising into the air, gratitude binding everything to everything else...song and voice, piano and hand, composer and ear, silence and sound, memory and hope, sorrow and joy.

**The First Reading** *this morning is the poem Wonderbread by Alfred Corn, 1997.*

Loaf after loaf, in several sizes,  
and never does it not look fresh,  
as though its insides weren't moist  
or warm crust not the kind that spices  
a room with the plump aroma of toast.

Found on the table; among shadows  
next to the kitchen phone; dispatched  
FedEx (without return address, though).  
Someone, possibly more than one  
person, loves me. Well then, who?

Amazing that bread should be so weightless,  
down-light when handled, as a me  
dying to taste it takes a slice.  
Which lasts just long enough to reach  
my mouth, but then, at the first bite,

Nothing! Nothing but air, thin air ....  
Oh. One more loaf of wonderbread,  
only a pun for bread, seductive  
visually, but you could starve.  
Get rid of it, throw it in the river—

Beyond which, grain fields.  
Future food  
for the just and the unjust,  
those who love, and do not love.

**The Second Reading** *this morning are a few thoughts offered by my friend and colleague Janne Eller Isaacs, who with her husband Robbie serves our terrific congregation in St.*

*Paul, MN. These sentences were in a sermon she offered two weeks ago, which I asked her if I could use in my edition of her amazing words. Jonah, in the reading, is their first born, a man in his mid-twenties who is, from his place in Brooklyn, NY, fighting a diagnosis of cancer, tooth and nail. He had just had some surgery the week before Janne's sermon on gratitude to remove some growths.*

Gratefulness, "great fullness" as David Steindl-Rast reminds us, "is the full response of the human heart to the gratuitousness of all that is."

Cultivating gratitude begins with the act of acknowledgement – yes, there *are* blessings in our lives. There *is* a feast set before us. When we recognize and acknowledge the feast, take a moment to let the feast fill our spirits, we are expanding our gratitude.

This is true even in the midst of the trials and tribulations of troubling times.

The Psalmist says: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Thou settest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. My cup runneth over.* No matter what, I will testify to the feast set before me. This is the gift of cultivating gratitude. This is the gift of naming what I am grateful for every day, even the days that contain disappointment and despair. Each day I must describe and acknowledge the feast. What is this feast? This week (for example) it was days full of particular and spectacular blessings—we watched as our country moved toward a new kind of hope-fulness. It is the staff here at Unity with whom I have the great privilege to work. It is the bag of popcorn left at our doorstep by Brian and Angela. It is my dear friend and colleague Meg, saying she would be with me during Jonah's latest surgery, and we could do anything. She provided a list. I was especially captivated by her suggestion of throwing dishes against the garage wall.

Having to cultivate a discipline of gratitude has saved my life these past few weeks since Jonah's recurrence. It has kept me focused in the present. It has provided the structure to take me beyond my fears about his future. It has helped me focus on those things that are so much more important and significant than our economic downturn. It has forced me to hold the joy *and* the sorrow. It has challenged the life of my spirit to be large enough to contain it all—

## **Sermon**

Over the almost 30 years of my ministry, I have come to respect, and even love many of my colleagues. They don't live close, most of them, but I work with them long distance on projects, laugh and cry with them at meetings and conferences, stop at their house for breakfast while traveling, call them up to ask advice or read their many books; this, since so many of them seem to be authors.

Forrest Church, minister for 30 years at All Souls church in Manhattan, is one of those I have worked with many times, whose books I've read, whose house I have visited for breakfast, who has laughed and cried with me, advised me, cajoled me and supported me.

Though we are the same age, I have always regarded him as a kind of mentor. I love him very much.

When, a few years ago, he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, I was disheartened and depressed to hear it. When it was treated successfully, I was overjoyed. And it when it came back all the more voraciously, promising him an early death, it knocked me down to the ground.

At General Assembly this year, one of our annual meetings of congregations in our Association, Forrest was given a life-time achievement award. He was feted and praised. At the gracious invitation of Kay Montgomery, our Associational vice-president, I too offered a few words of thanks at a luncheon in his honor.

Forrest also gave a talk at General Assembly. My occupancy estimation told me around 1000 people came, almost a third of the whole Assembly.

I was one of those people of course. As usual, Forrest, a bit on the thin side, his beard unusually scraggy, delivered one of his amazing, and quite typical, self-effacing talks, with a smile never far from his face. But he was not talking about cheerful things, or at least, things that fit neatly into that category. He was talking about his diagnosis, his manner of dying and his theology of living. "Here's how I see it," he said in conclusion. "Love what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are."

Many of us, however, never got past the first phrase. "Love what you have?!! Love what you HAVE? Man, you have terminal cancer! Are you telling me you love that cancer, are *thankful*, to have been given such a diagnosis?"

Sure enough, when he was done, he had enough energy left to field a few questions, and the inner question that I just expressed was asked, worded almost as I worded it.

"Look," answered Forrest, (and here I am offering my version of what he said...there may be others who heard him differently), "I don't want to die of cancer. I don't want to die of anything. But the world doesn't spin on my axis. Nor yours. Death, unevenly distributed by age, is the truth about all of our lives. To be thankful only for the good things of this life, the good luck, grace, abundance and joy, without paying attention that they are, all of them, yes, all of them, tangled up completely with the tragic things of life, is to miss the point of loving what you have, about being grateful for your particular life. I can't single out my cancer and say that it is something completely separated out from my need to love and be loved, my decisions about career and family, my every other sorrow and joy. It all runs together, if I am ruthlessly honest, and what good is theology if it's not ruthlessly honest? My cancer is not outside my life. It's part and parcel with rest of my life...it's all part of who I am. And I am part of your life, and you are part of mine. I love what I have, because there is no way to separate it all out from what I do not have, in this case, health. Besides," he added by way of ironic humor, "if I scrunched up my face and sent all of my hatred toward my cancer, and told it that I didn't think it was fair that I was dying so young, do you think I would live any longer?"

I too struggled against his point. But over the days since then, I have to admit he does have one. In some ways, the first line of his mantra, “love what you have,” is another way of saying: “Well, life isn’t fair, you know.”

Almost everyone I know says that. From people writing newspaper advice columns, to ministers, to teachers, to your average woman or man on the street.

People seem to differ drastically, however, as to why that is true. Some say the reason that’s true is that whatever happens, good or bad, is just God’s will. Their God, they mean. The one they say is the only one. Well, I don’t know about you, but when I hear things like that, I suddenly feel that their God must be a pretty arbitrary character, irascible, not loving in any way that makes sense to me, and someone who, in the clear words of theologian Ricky Ricardo, has “a lot of ‘splaining to do.”

Others say that people bring things like cancer on themselves somehow...they either want to suffer because of some unresolved conflict or some unforgiven sin; or they did something awful in their last life. Again, I am not sure how “blaming the victim” in either of these ways makes things easier to face. It just adds layers of guilt and shame to the suffering, which doesn’t strike me as helpful.

Others are quick to deny arbitrary gods and vast schemes of blame, but as soon as something awful happens, their heart is packed to the edge with the question “Why me? Why NOW?” which implies that life is somehow *supposed* to be fair, and that maybe someone was sleeping at the switch. In any case, they sound very resentful and, somewhere inside, EXPECT life to be fair...almost, it seems to me, automatically. They think life should be fair without having to go to BREAD meetings to try and make things fair by increment and intention, without having to do Empty Bowls events on Saturdays to make sure some people have at least a little something to eat, or without cooking for the homeless on Fridays. The mashed potatoes should just be there.

And still others will be quick to come at Forrest’s proverb combatively, like our questioner in the audience...like many of us there, if the truth was made plain. He was just the only guy with the guts to pose the question. He just didn’t press far enough. The obvious conclusion to his questions was: “You don’t think a woman in an abusive relationship should love the abuse, do you? You don’t think the Jews or Roma people thrown into Bergen-Belsen should have patted their tormentors on the head, thanked them, and blown them kisses, do you?”

No, and no and no and no and no and no and no.

Look, I know what he says is hard to get. I know that not everyone will be able to get it right off the bat. I know that my powers of explanation are limited, and my own wrestling with his great idea is not done yet.

But I AM convinced my friend and colleague Janne, however, understands what Forrest is saying in her very bones. She does not love her son Jonah's cancer, or praise his pain. She simply does not separate out his diagnosis from his brilliance, his beauty, his sense of humor, his deep capacity for love, or his profound struggles with his own diagnosis. She does not separate out his cancer from her relationship to him, his to her, or his relationship to his father or friends. She gives thanks for the whole of her life with him. She loves all that she has in him because the cancer cannot be split off and put on a shelf somehow. And listen, it sounded to me that when her friend Meg suggested throwing plates against the wall of the garage, she was already clutching a nice porcelain gravy boat in her hand ready to smash it to pieces, ready to admit that, as Jonah's mother, she is filled with feelings that admit no finer or more authentic expression. But instead of smashing plates, she writes these wonderful words as she begins to conclude her sermon.

*Having to cultivate a discipline of gratitude has saved my life these past few weeks since Jonah's recurrence. It has kept me focused in the present. It has provided the structure to take me beyond my fears about his future. It has helped me focus on those things that are so much more important and significant than our economic downturn. It has forced me to hold the joy **and** the sorrow. It has challenged the life of my spirit to be large enough to contain it all—*

Large enough, spacious enough, inclusive enough...to contain all.

When I was in seminary, I took a course called Romantic American Religion. It was taught at the Jesuit School by a very competent professor named Dr. Gelpi. In the class, he addressed American religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, our Unitarian and Univesalist ancestors here in the states, the Transcendentalists...Emerson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, Bronson Alcott etc. He called them "romantic" because they seemed to live their lives with a kind of rose-colored-glasses type of optimism that couldn't find a healthy way to respond to suffering, tragedy and misery in this life. He pointed out that Emerson, who lost both beloved wife and son to death, could find nothing else but life-long depression to offer in response.

I think Professor Gelpi overstated his case by several furlongs, and I did offer him a few good arguments against his thesis, which he graciously accepted; but his observation is not entirely without foundation.

To use the images of our poet, Alfred Corn, it's not enough to argue whether bread should be light and moist, like Wonderbread, or thick and crusty, like a peasant loaf made by my grandmother from whole grain. In the same manner, Forrest would say that it's not enough to argue whether theology should be light and optimistic, like Transcendentalism, or thick and crusty, like some forms of humanism, or modern forms of Unitarian theism. For beyond all those arguments about bread, says the poet, "grain fields. Future food for the just and the unjust, those who love, and do not love." In the same way, beyond all arguments about theology, behold the fields of our common life, which we share with the just and unjust, those who love and those who do not love.

There is no way to live in a world that does not have joy and sorrow mixed together, the just and unjust living side by side (sometimes inside a single person), the sick and the healthy sitting in each other's lap. It's the way it is. No one is to blame, no one is at fault, it's not a mistake, it's not the result of someone's ancient sin in a garden, as our religious ancestor Pelagius said with clarity over 1600 years ago. It's simply the way things are. To acknowledge *that* is to "love what you have." And that, I think, is what Forrest means by his wise, simple, yet always surprising statement.

Personally, I hope Forrest will be around a lot longer. His treatment has already defied the odds presented him, he's gained 20 lbs, and instead of this being a eulogy, as I feared it might be when I scheduled it last August, this is very much a living testament of love, admiration and friendship. Maybe, if I am very lucky, I will one day get to throw plates, with him, right against the hard walls of the ground floor of his New York condo building.

Forrest always ends his sermons with the following words to his congregation: *God bless you. I love you.* I won't presume to steal his traditional words, but I think I will use one of my own traditional phrases and aim it toward him: "Forrest, thanks for being exactly who you are, and no one else. And, yes, I love you."

## **Offering**

### **Table Prayer for Thanksgiving**

(Jolinda) Bread of the world, we come to your table.

#### **First Reader:**

May this bread be for us our *joy*. Joy before the good gifts of sun and soil, seed and water, sowing and harvest, kneading and baking. Without such gifts, we would not be alive. Thanks for life. *here, break bread*

#### **Second Reader:**

May this bread be for us a *blessing*. May it speak to us of the sacred meals of our ancestors when the bread they ate was more than bread, and when they knew they were more than their separate selves.

*here, break bread*

#### **Third Reader:**

May this bread be for us a *promise*. May it speak to us of a day to come when we have worked to see that there is ample food for every human being on earth.

*here, break bread*

#### **Fourth Reader:**

May this bread be for us a *vision*. A vision of a time men and women and children shall come from north and south and east and west and sit down to eat in peace, together with sufficient food for all.

*here, breaks bread*

(Eric) May this broken bread be for us all *a call*. A call to remember that sharing the bread is just as important as feasting on it. For such bread does not disappear when it has been eaten, but remains present whenever we welcome each other in love and respect, whenever we stand by each other in broken times, whenever we remain thankful that we can serve, and give.

(Jolinda) And so blest are you, Love, our joy, our blessing, our promise, our vision and our call. In you we are transformed and made whole, despite our brokenness. For all that is our lives, we give our thanks and praise.

*(here, already prepared baskets are passed, beginning with the one in the center of the table. the rest will be under the table)*

**Blessing:** Love what you have.  
Do what you can.  
Be who you are.

*or, in the worlds of our children's story*  
We don't give thanks because we're happy.  
We are happy because we give thanks.