

Eating Heresy
Thanksgiving
November 23, 2014
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening

We are here,
on a surprisingly balmy day,
after an unusually cold week,
to worship, to give thanks that we are alive,
and that everything not only exists
but depends on everything and everyone else.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Singing 123 Spirit of Life

Ingathering: The Thanksgiving Donut

One day, not long before Thanksgiving Day, two friends were sitting in the park, talking to each other about the holiday. It was a sunny warm day, and the park was crowded. The park benches were all filled with people of all ages and descriptions.

The first friend said: "I am going to my grandmother's house to eat on Thursday. She makes wonderful food, but it's not what people expect. Since my family is Chinese-American, we have Chinese food on Thanksgiving, although my grandmother sometimes uses cranberries in some of the vegetable dishes."

"I know what you mean," said the other friend. "We eat Thanksgiving dinner at my Aunt Imelda's house. And we don't eat turkey, because my aunt and her partner are both vegetarians, but we have so many other good dishes. My favorite is the dessert. She makes a giant donut the size of a pie, and we all eat it like it was a pumpkin pie. It doesn't have any pumpkin in it because my brother Ivan is allergic to squashes, and I think a pumpkin is a kind of squash."

"Really?" asked the other friend. "A donut? With a hole in it?"

"Yep."

"Wow. That's cool."

Then he said: "You know, I wonder why donuts have holes in them."

"I don't know. I asked my uncle Lamar that one day, 'cause he used to work in a Krispy Kream donut shop when he was in college. He said they used to have a sign up in the shop that said, "As you go through life, make this your goal. Pay attention to the donut and not to the hole."

"What does *that* mean?" said the other.

"That's what I asked him. He said, "People too often pay attention to what they do not have – the hole – instead of being thankful for what they do have, which is the donut."

"Makes sense," said the other.

"That's what I thought. But my uncle said, 'I think it's the other way around – people actually think too much about the donut, and not enough about the hole. Sometimes people don't notice that other people don't have what they have, that other people don't have anything to eat but the hole."

As they were talking, an older couple left their park bench, and walked over to them. They smiled at the friends. The man looked kind. He had a brown bag. He opened it up, and she put her hand in. "Hello," she said. "I overheard you two talking about a donut. Is the outside more important? Is the inside – the hole – more important? Funny question. Here is what I think the most important thing is."

She reached in, and took out a beautiful donut. "Just came out of the donut shop," the man said. "It's still warm." Then he said, "Watch." And he took the donut and broke it into three pieces. "Some for you, some for you, some for me. The most important thing about a donut – or any food for that matter – is that you share it with others."

Greeting

Affirming

The miracle is not to walk on burning charcoal, or in air, or on water; the miracle is to walk on the earth. You breathe in. You become aware that you are alive, walking on this planet. The greatest miracle is to be alive. *Thich Nhat Hanh 1992*

Singing #331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All v. 1

Communing:

People wait anxiously, in Ferguson Missouri and around the country, for the announcement of the grand jury about the man who killed an unarmed teenager. Teeth are set on edge as the last leaves of fall float to the browning earth.

In Iraq and Syria, Christians leave their hometowns of a thousand years; Muslims who are declared the wrong kind of Muslims are killed; the religious Yazidi people flee to the mountains for their lives; while cunning terrorists play on the nerves of weary, angry nations. Not far away, Jerusalem, the great city bristles and weeps. And soon the Thanksgiving holiday here in the States will throw itself into this potent mix, calling us to ground ourselves in gratitude.

So be it. And so, oh Love, I am grateful that my heart still feels, and my brain still thinks, and that I can be outraged and sad, and can respond with my full self to all the difficult events in this world. I am thankful that I share the world with people whose lives are as important to them as mine is to me. I am grateful for all I have yet to learn. I am grateful for people who love me even when I am feeling unlovable, and for writers and musicians and storytellers that have charged my heart with hope, health of spirit and insight. I am grateful to be alive at all. I am grateful for the shape of a single moment under the heavens, each second of that moment a precious gift which I only have to recognize to receive. I am grateful for this present silence, which folds its arms around me, and holds me secure, and gently rocks me, and breathes with me in tenderness and solace.

silence

Our time of Naming this morning will be in two parts. First this: our state, Ohio, lacks any hate-crime legislation that addresses the unusually high percentage of transgender people who are murdered in our state because of who they are. In the last twenty months, the following transgender women have been so killed: I name them to honor their memory: Tiffany Edwards, CeCe Dove, Betty Skinner, Brittany Nicole Britt-Sturgis. I want to also remember their friends and family who will not be able to break bread with them on Thanksgiving Day. May we keep a time of silence in honor of them.

silence

Second, at this time of year in particular, when holiday time compresses our feelings of love and loss, I set aside time for us to gather our more personal memories together, and call to mind, by naming, those whom we love, those who are far away, and especially those whom we remember in the depths of our love.

naming

And finally, I am grateful for the gift of music, which transcends the ordinary moments of silence, or word or act, bestowing to them beauty and grace.

Anthems

The First Reading comes from an article in last week's *Christian Century*, progressive Christian biweekly that most UU ministers I know subscribe to because of the quality of both the reporting and the poetry. The reporter, Lindsay Ellis, is a minister.

A 90-year-old man and two clergy received citations on November 2 after Fort Lauderdale, Florida, became the latest city to place restrictions on feeding the homeless.

Arnold Abbott, who founded *Love Thy Neighbor* in 1991, has been providing food to homeless people at a local beach for more than 20 years. "After I was cited, I took everybody over to a church parking lot. We did feed everybody. It wasn't a complete waste."

Abbott, who has been ordered to appear in court, faces a maximum of 60 days in jail.

Ray Sternberg joined First Baptist Church in Ft. Lauderdale, in 1994 and recalls a Thanksgiving dinner held annually on a blocked-off area on the boulevard where the church is located. Carloads of volunteers would serve hundreds of homeless people each year, he said.

"You have so many homeless here in Fort Lauderdale, and the need is great," he said.

More than 30 U.S. cities have restricted, or are in the process of restricting, the sharing of food with the homeless, according to a report from the National Coalition for the Homeless.

The report, called "Share No More: The Criminalization of Efforts to Feed People in Need," aims to dispel what the authors call a widespread myth—that food sharing perpetuates homelessness.

"In many cases food sharing programs might be the only occasion in which some homeless individuals have access to healthy, safe food," the report reads.

The Second Reading *for this Thanksgiving celebration comes from the pen of the New Zealand theologian, Lloyd Gearing, who was tried as a heretic in the Presbyterian church of New Zealand back in 1967 for speaking of a new Christian faith without either a personal God or a literally resuscitated Jesus. The trial ended in no decision after a great deal of back and forth. He has written many remarkable books.*

In 1972, the *Club of Rome*, an international assembly of business leaders, published *The Limits to Growth*. This computer-based report concluded that the world order would collapse if population growth, industrial expansion, increased pollution and the depletion of natural resources were to continue at current rates. The *Club of Rome* called for "a Copernican revolution of the mind" which abandoned the commitment to endless economic growth, and a shift from consumerism to a more service-based economy. The recommendations of the *Club of Rome* were heavily criticized by business interests who had the most to lose, but their claims served only to illustrate how much political and economic ideology is driven by self-interest.

Also, the fast increasing population upsets the ecological balance between the various species and our source of sustenance. Humans, in order to live, are interfering with the food chains which have evolved over time, depriving both ourselves and other species of sustenance. All food for human consumption comes from four biological systems: croplands, grasslands, forests and fisheries. Each of these is being seriously depleted. Because of the clearing of pasture and

forest lands for agriculture, vast amounts of topsoil are being swept down into the ocean and lost for the future. The United States alone loses four to six *billion* tons annually.

Preaching

Well, Thanksgiving arrives this week. It's the only holiday of the year which focuses quite so completely on the idea of a common meal. On food.

Of course, most of us eat meals most every day, not just on this one Thursday in November. And so that's where I will begin, I guess.

It was a different world back in the 1950s. Today, when people talk about China, they talk about a superpower. They talk about economic clout, and how the Chinese literally own large parts of our economy. They talk about large sparkling cities and superfast trains that float on magnetic cushions. They even point out vast environmental offenses.

But back when Eisenhower was president, China meant something else. If, during nightly supper, I didn't finish the food on my plate – whether it was the dreaded dandelion leaf salad, or the liver and onions – I was given The Lecture.

"Don't you know how grateful you should be to have any food at all? The people in China are all starving for lack of food, and there you are complaining about a salad. You will sit there, young man, until you finish your supper."

My brother, the most stubborn of us all, would sometimes sit there till 9, arms crossed, refusing to eat. My sister and I usually caved.

Later, when I was in college, and first went to a Chinese restaurant, I was a bit surprised that the Chinese had developed such a complex, delicious cuisine. Weren't they all starving?

Now from there, let me focus more tightly on the holiday. Many people associate Thanksgiving with a special menu. Some people assume it's a relatively common menu across the country. It's not. On Thanksgiving, at my house as a kid, we only had Italian food. None of this New World nonsense, like mashed potatoes or candied sweet potatoes. We had stuffed artichokes, and both homemade ravioli and sausage. For dessert we ate a special layered trifle my grandmothers *both* made, called Zuppa Inglese, with enough rum and brandy in it to make all of us children a bit tipsy, without knowing what was going on.

And of course, we ate everything on our plate lest we get The Lecture about China.

Things are different for me now. My blood family, except my sister, is gone. And as usual, this Thanks-giving, I am cooking for a whole group of friends, my new family, including my adopted son. But there is no easy universal menu at my table. Around my table will be many people who can, or will, only eat some foodstuffs, and not others. Some for example, are allergic to cow's milk, but not to goat's milk. Some go into shock if they have a single walnut. Some cannot have sweet potatoes just because they *are* so sweet. Others cannot have wheat flour. Or gluten in

anything. Some are on a paleo-diet, meaning they prefer to eat only meat and a few choice greens, no grains whatsoever. Some choose not to eat any turkey, because it is meat; others, who hated spinach when they were kids, still don't like it, and are not really sure of *anything* called a vegetable, especially if it's green. Some will only drink water. Others will drink wine.

At yet, we will all have a good time. We won't argue about anything, which is just silly anyway. We won't offer lectures to each other. We will talk about many things: our lives, our loves, our losses. We'll also talk about the latest news – especially, perhaps, news having to do with the food we are then going to be eating. For example, Mother Earth News reports that new studies reveal that the increasing gluten intolerance we hear about today is probably due to the use of Monsanto pesticides like Round Up on our crops. This chemical technology is apparently actually changing our bodies. We may also talk about how alcohol has changed, permanently, the chemical composition of the brain of some of our alcoholic relatives, even as some of us drink un-oaked chardonnay, or my pallid version of my grandmother's Zuppa Inglese.

We'll talk about how margarine used to be virtuous and butter a crime, and about how recent studies suggest the exact reverse is true. We'll discuss the social ethic of vegetarianism, or the remarkable improvements to personal health a strict adherence to the paleo-diet has made in some other lives.

And some folks will talk about how they worked in a food kitchen before they came over to my place, serving the homeless a taste of the food this meal – centered holiday proclaims.

Of course, that seems to be getting harder to do, according the reports in the Christian Science Monitor and Christian Century. I offered you a snippet from the latter this morning – about the law in Ft. Lauderdale diminishing the capacity of kind folks to feed the hungry – as they have been doing for the last twenty years with no problem until now.

Oh, I know, I know – there has to be some good reason for this right? The mayor is sure that feeding the hungry is promoting homelessness somehow, as if that had been the life goal of the hungry from the beginning: graduate high-school, get a job, lose it, and finally, at last, glory be – become homeless and poor. What blather. Certainly the real reason for this is that it's just plain embarrassing. Out of sight, out of mind. After all, this is the best country in the world, and this can't really be happening here. Poor people live in India and China, not here.

I heard that every year when I was growing up. The United States was “it.” The best. Top of the line. Land of opportunity. Anyone can do anything they want if they put their mind to it. I was told how we were poor when I was young, barely making it, and now, look at us! A nice small bungalow of brick on the East Side of Detroit, and food on the table every day.

Yet, when I was a kid, I must have been some sort of budding theologian, because when I was told that I was the luckiest kid on earth, and should be thankful that I lived here instead of China, Mexico or India, I kept on thinking about why I was born *here* and not there. Did God assign me to this geography? What kind of a God, I asked myself, but never aloud, would make things so unfair? I was told that God was good, and God was love, but I couldn't understand how it was

good that someone my age, who looked like me, except maybe for different colored hair, or shape of eyes, should live without food on the table every day.

I really haven't changed my theological mind much. I don't ask that question of an almighty God now, but I ask it about human beings who live in this country and in the rest of the so-called First World.

As you heard from the reading in Lloyd Geering's book, back in the 1970s a group of business leaders, who called themselves the *Club of Rome*, suggested that the commitment of First World leadership to unregulated economic growth was part of a problem which could actually bring civilization to a halt. Larger and large growth economies all the time, based on larger and larger technological advances in food production, without regard to the destruction of the ecosystems, is a huge problem. the *Club of Rome* writes that New Zealand heretic Lloyd Geering, called for 'a Copernican revolution of the mind' which abandoned the commitment to endless economic growth, and a shift from consumerism to a more servicebased economy."

The *Club of Rome*, although consisting of business leaders, was soundly condemned as *heretical* by other business leaders less visionary. That is not a metaphorical term, heretical. You don't have to be religious to be a heretic. It's the language they used to soundly condemn these visionaries. Put "*Club of Rome*" in your search engines, those of you with computers, and then count the number of times the fiery word *heresy* is used to soundly condemn them. You might be amazed. It sounds like Calvin shouting at the Pope during the Reformation, not 1972.

Their predictions are all coming true. For the sake of *great* profit for some, *no* profit for others, the way food for our tables is being produced by agribusiness literally strips the soil from our land – six billion tons annually.

And every day you will find that the assertions, the prophecies if you will, of the *Club of Rome*, are slowly but surely being recognized as visionary and truthful. By the progressively religious. By the environmentalists. By Nobel economists.

But watch it! If you yourself express your concern for the environmental impact of the economic growth creed; or if you bring up the hungry by feeding them visibly on the street; or if you suggest that a human-centered economy for all – a service economy – that builds communities, promotes equality and equal access to the table, including the one where the food is, the big guns will come out in force. "You're talking socialism here! You are a communist, and communism failed, you fool." *Socialism. Communism.* Two punch words that lecture me: Case closed. Shut up. Perpetual economic growth is good, criticism is bad. Billions for some, minimum wage for others, that's Realism. So what if your bodies are changing, and you can no longer eat bread without getting sick. So what if the ecosystem itself is distorted? You're eating, aren't you? So it's got a little radiation in it. Complainer. What, are you against capitalism? Heresy! Un-American. You're making Jefferson turn in his grave. And don't you know? China is doing the same thing. Polluting, giving up their socialist ideals for unbridled capitalism. You gotta get with the plan, man. They are *not* starving any more like your mother told you. They are winning. And obviously, we have to destroy the world before they do. It's a matter of pride and patriotism."

But me, little old heretic me – I think the *Club of Rome* said something important. A Copernican Revolution of the Mind. I like the sound of that. In fact, I may bring it up at Thanksgiving Dinner when we are talking about the world, and all the things food symbolizes for us.

So yes, some will eat Chinese for Thanksgiving. Some, like me and my family, Italian. Others will eat "New World" foods, like corn and squash. Others will eat donated food on the street in Ft. Lauderdale as the guy who feeds them gets thrown into jail for his effrontery. Someone, maybe in a story, will eat a giant Thanksgiving donut his aunt baked for dessert. Some will focus on the donut itself, I suppose. Some will focus on the hole at the center. But as the older guy said to the two friends: "The best way to look at the donut...or the world we live on... is to share it."

Offering

The Thanksgiving Table Prayer for The Breaking of Bread 2014

Minister: ***We celebrate that we are all children of one universe, bodies part of the greater body of all things, from our world all the way to the farthest star.***

Eastern Voice: **Bread of the East, given to us, be like the promise of sunrise, with hope for a bright new day.**

(here bread is lifted, broken)

Minister: ***Only bread is for the breaking. The trust and boundaries which bind us into healthy community, are not for the breaking.***

Southern Voice: **Bread of the South, given to us, be like the promise of harvest that we too might be fruitful in word and deed.**

(here bread is lifted, broken)

Coordinator: ***Only bread is for the breaking. Our promise to embody our vision of justice for all with our day-to-day lives, is not for the breaking.***

Western Voice: **Bread of the West, given to us, be like the sunset, the golden fulfillment of the day that we might be grateful that we can finally share the gifts of the earth.**

(here bread is lifted, broken)

Religious Educator: ***Only bread is for the breaking. Our commitment to share real bread, real care, real conversation is not for the breaking.***

Northern Voice: **Bread of the North, given to us, be the reminder many hands are required and must organize together, to make you: the hands of the sower, the hands of the harvester, the hands of the baker, the hands of the shopkeeper.**

(here bread is lifted, broken)

Minister: ***Only bread is for the breaking. The vision of a world to come, where no one is kept away from the welcome table of life, and love is not for the breaking.***

Congregation: **Bread of the world, given to us, be the foretaste of a healing feast from which no one will be turned away, to which all will be welcome.**

Minister: ***Only bread is for the breaking. Our spirits are not for breaking, not now, not ever. I say it now: all things are ready. Therefore, let us keep the feast.***

(the baskets of various breads are passed non-wheat and gluten free in red napkins)

Singing #407

Blessing