

A Harvest of Gratitude

- a homily by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Delivered on Sunday, November 18, 2018

Meditation and Prayer

“A Harvest Time Prayer”

- by the Rev. Max Coots, Minister Emeritus, UU Church, Canton, NY

Harvest [time is] an attitude, not a time of year. So maybe [We'll] be wise enough to feel a sort of litany of gratitude:

For seeds - that, like memories and minds, keep in themselves the recollection of what they were and the power to become something more than they are...

For soil - that accumulation of lives piled up by death that gives new life...

For the justice of the earth - that gave me about as many weeds and wilt and scab and bugs as vegetables but, in the end, gave me enough for what I need...

For hands - those miracles on the ends of my arms that let me tend my vegetables and pull my weeds, and for mind enough to know the difference between the two...

For calluses - life's defense against that softness that makes survival difficult...

For the ability to work and the will to work and the work to do, and the time to do it in...

And, finally, for that sense of kinship to it all, that singleness, that unity that is the basis of faith...

For these gifts that are the harvest of our lives, may we be grateful.

Homily

“Gratitude is the memory of the heart.” ~ French proverb

Today’s message will be necessarily short because of the feast lovingly prepared that awaits us over in the library annex. The Harvest Feast we celebrate on the Sunday before the national holiday of Thanksgiving has been a tradition in this congregation going back at least as long as I’ve been here. Anyone know what year this tradition began?

It is a lovely tradition, blessedly filled with luscious food, but also filled with opportunities to share together in community who we are as a people of faith and love – it is a tradition we created that now cyclically comes ‘round to help us re-member who we are and celebrate.

November is a month of remembrance and final celebrations of harvest before the onset of winter. I do like the opening words of our meditation today where its writer likens harvest time to an attitude rather than simply a time of year – it suggests something then that we must remember to do, to practice on a regular basis because the things we might need to harvest won’t necessarily follow a seasonal pattern dictated by the Earth’s movement around the sun. I would put the harvesting of gratitude, for instance, into the category of an attitude worthy of ritual practice.

We have used the “ancient and always” story of Stone Soup as a metaphorical framework for our Harvest Feast over the past several years – we even used it to frame our stewardship drive celebration service one year – it’s a flexible story that way. Our former RE Director, Anna, began what might possibly become a new tradition here last year by making a big pot of stone soup with our children and youth the night before the Harvest Feast. I believe another pot of stone soup was made last night as well that will soon be enjoyed at our feast.

As I was preparing for this morning I was struck yet again by the circular nature of life and remembered the words of Black Elk, the medicine man – the holy man – of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) people who once wrote “Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle.” The sweet irony in all of this is that quote was featured prominently on the website I shut down shortly after I started working for this congregation as your worship director ten years ago, a website that was part of the freelance storytelling work that both preceded and helped open the door to my work here. The name of that freelance business - some of you may remember this, but many of you don’t know this part of my story – the name of that website and my freelance business was Stone Soup Productions. For my first year and a half here, I thought of this as an extension of my story work, a work that had been framed on a metaphor for the rejuvenation of community. But the work here grew into something new, a slightly different framework of ministry for me and for all of us.

So...you may understand more clearly now why this particular story has been used so often here since I’ve been with you – I arrived here with it already embedded in my being as it formed the ethos of my work in the world. In 2008 I wrote my own retelling of the tale which features a lone traveler (other older versions generally have two travelers) who arrives in a village seemingly too filled with fear and distrust to give food to a hungry stranger. My version depicts the children of the village as assistants – or co-conspirators, if you will - to the traveler in his attempt to address the need for repair he sees in the community. Can someone help me fill in the gaps here – what is the central trickery used by the traveler to help the villagers?

[Congregants contribute to an improvised retelling of Stone Soup. Complete text to my version is included below.]

One thing I’ve learned through storytelling (plus some study of Jungian theory) is that each of us carry within us all the characters in any given story and we’re capable of finding resonance with different characters at various times when we hear the story. I imagine all of us at some time or another can identify with the fearful and doubtful villagers or the curious children willing to take a chance. I carry all of this within me...as well as

that of the Traveler, the character who resonates most strongly with me today and likely will through the next three months as I leave my position as minister of this community to continue on my way down the road to explore other paths of community ministry and artistic work.

The professional ministers in communities of faith are very much travelers, you see. We are transients, not necessarily by nature but by the dictates of this work. You see, this role I now fill as your “professional minister” is primarily that of a guide, a teacher (and sometimes referee); it is not intended to be the sole repository of the ministry of this congregation. I was never *the ministry* of this church; just one form that ministry can take. The ministry of a congregation always resides within the community of faith itself. It is a ministry shared among the people, and if you have not learned that from me over these many years together, then I have failed miserably in this work.

But I don't believe I have failed. I see the evidence to the contrary all around me – I will be talking more in length about that evidence next Sunday. I also believe it is in transitions like these, in the letting go of the old way of being in order to lean into the new that awaits us is where we find what we're truly made of; it is at these threshold moments where we can re-member yet again who we are and what we most highly value. It will be my job over our few remaining months together – my final blessed work as your minister – to simply leave well and to assist you in your preparations for your continuing ministry. Our Board has commissioned a fantastic transition team dedicated to leading this process – you all will be receiving a communication this week to more deeply answer your most pressing questions. I won't likely be able to accomplish answering all of your questions today, but please know I am committed to doing so through my remaining time here.

By “leaving well” what I mean in part is this: to be open and receptive to all the feelings we have about my departure and to help process all that. In essence - to not avoid or evade the grieving process that accompanies loss and to help us all move through it. Goodbyes, transitions, change – all of it – is hard and often messy work that is only made more difficult if we're not open and honest with each other through the process.

So, for today, this is what I want you to remember – and I've used a little alliteration to help you: Growth – Goodness – Grief - Gratitude. Let us remember to honor the growth and goodness that has happened and continues to happen here, to remember to be open and supportive of one another in the grief process, and to remember and express the gratitude we feel for each other and for all that this beloved community has come to mean in our lives.

And know this: If gratitude is truly the “memory of the heart” as the French proverb suggests, then I carry a sufficient supply of memories of you all...and of all of us together...to last several lifetimes.

Blessed be and amen.

Stone Soup

~ an ancient tale retold by Dawn Daniels 2/22/08

Once upon a time, faraway yet very near, a weary traveler came to a quiet village. He went door to door begging for food to silence the hunger in his belly. The fearful villagers each in turn told the stranger that food was scarce – there was nothing to share – and closed their doors to him.

Oh, they are in great need indeed! thought the hungry man.

So from the center of the village square the traveler called out, "All of you take heart. I will make enough stone soup to feed us all!"

Stone Soup? How ridiculous! thought the villagers. *You can't make soup from a stone. . .*

The traveler pulled from his knapsack a banged-up old tin can and filled it with water from the town well. He then built a small fire and set the can over the flame. The village children had wandered over out of curiosity and were watching the man from the safety of some nearby trees. They were amazed to see the man take from his pocket a common earth-toned stone and toss it with a loud *kerplunk* into the can of water.

As he crouched down, stirring the water with a stick, the weary traveler spoke aloud to himself. "Oh, this will be a fine stone soup, more than enough for everyone to share."

"My parents think you're a fool!" one of the boys called out from behind an oak tree.

The traveler kept stirring.

One of the children, a very small girl, ran from the shelter of the trees and approached the man. She watched him as he stirred, humming quietly to himself. "Mister, that can won't hold enough soup for all of us," she blurted out, "my mother has a much bigger soup pot."

After a pause she added, "Would you like us to go get it for you?"

"Why, thank you, sweet girl," replied the stranger, "you are most kind."

So the little girl ran with several of the other children to fetch the bigger soup pot. As the children worked together with the traveler to fill the new pot with water, they asked him what stone soup tasted like. "Oh, it's quite delicious," said the traveler, "and the best thing is that it's always different every time and every place I make it."

"Why?" asked the children.

"Every time I make this wondrous soup, something quite magical happens," replied the traveler.

"What?" they asked.

"Well, it usually starts with someone going to fetch a little of what they think will make the soup taste better," said the man, "like a bit of carrot or a bit of onion. Most people seem to think that the stone needs a little help. I could be wrong - maybe it's different here in your village - but so far on this journey I have found that people have much more to share than they think they do."

The children were quiet for a time, and then they gathered closer round, gazing into the soup pot. Could it be true? After a few moments they all ran off toward their homes, calling over their shoulders as they went, "We'll be back soon - keep stirring!"

It wasn't long before the villagers – young and old alike – began arriving in the town square. The little girl, who had first offered the bigger soup pot, stepped forward with her mother by the hand. "We would like to add some carrot to the soup," the mother said. The little girl tossed a handful of chopped carrot into the pot.

"Mmmm," grinned the traveler, "the soup smells better already. Thank you."

Soon all of the villagers were adding a little of this, a little of that to the steaming pot – onion, celery, more carrot, potato, turnips, rutabaga, green beans, barley, herbs, salt, even a little meat found its way into the soup. The traveler said a "thank-you" for each contribution.

It wasn't long before the village square was filled with the smell of the glorious soup and the sounds of the villagers talking and laughing together. Tables were brought out and soon covered with colorful cloths and plenty of bowls and spoons for everyone. Loaves of crusty bread appeared and even some cheese.

When the soup was done, all of the villagers gathered around the pot with bowls in hand to share in the bounty before them. The traveler served each person in turn then sat down to join in the feast. Everyone ate until their bellies were full.

When it was time to continue on his way, the traveler bent down to pack the old tin can into his knapsack. The villagers all gathered around him and he felt a small hand on his shoulder. "Here's your stone, Mister," said the little girl, "I found it at the bottom of the pot."

"I think you should keep it," the traveler said, looking around at them all. "You can use it to make stone soup whenever you need to remember that you have enough - and that when you share together - there is always enough."

And as the traveler left the village, he stooped down to pick up another common earth-toned stone, slipped it into his pocket and continued on his way.

"Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

~ Melody Beattie