

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

November 22, 2020

Rev. Andrew Frantz, contract minister

Harvest Feast: Mourning, Healing, Gratitude

*We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, hallelujah!*¹

Every time I hear that song I think of a table crowded with joyful Unitarian Universalists, because the first time I heard that song was at a UU summer camp in Ohio. A group of UU teenagers, one of them with a guitar, came through the dining hall at the summer camp singing that song and getting other people to join in. The welcome table to me means that everyone is welcome. It means that we share our meals at that table with everyone who joins us. What a great metaphor for Thanksgiving and for the Harvest Feast.

Today we celebrate the annual Harvest Feast of the UU Fellowship of Central Michigan, but in a totally different way. When we realized that we couldn't be together and have a big feast the way we usually do, we decided instead to take a collection of money and non-perishable foods and deliver it to the student food pantry at Central Michigan University. So metaphorically, at the welcome table of our congregation we are welcoming CMU students who are experiencing food insecurity. If you didn't have a chance to make a donation yet, you can drop off your donation after the worship service today, or contact me if today isn't a good time.

The harvest feast is about bounty, and it is about sharing, like the story that Elliot read for us today. And one thing I like about that story is that there are people at the table who have more than enough, and then there's a knock at the gate—and the people who came to the table brought something of value as well. This reminds me—and I need this reminder; maybe you do too—that when I reach out help other people, I benefit from that exchange too. I benefit because the people that I'm "helping" have something to offer me. I have something to learn from them. Sometimes we use the word "charity" for this work, which actually has a negative connotation. Let's remember when we engage in this kind of work—such as offering monetary donations or non-perishable food to the CMU food pantry—to have a *servant* mentality, not a *savior* mentality. I'm not trying to save anyone, I'm just trying to be of service to my fellow human beings if I can.

This makes me think about the holiday of Thanksgiving which I will be celebrating this Thursday. And I can't think of Thanksgiving without thinking of the stories of Pilgrims and Indians who supposedly had the first Thanksgiving in 1621. The real story is more complicated and not as nice as what I was taught in school when I was a child. The truth is that many Indigenous people see Thanksgiving not as a happy holiday but as a sad one. It represents the time when colonists first came from Europe and took over the native lands.

I want to share with you a quotation from the Reverend Susan Frederick Gray. In this quote she uses the term "turtle island," and for native people, turtle island refers to the whole world. She says:

*This year, let us be mindful that many hearts in the Indigenous communities of New England and across Turtle Island ache on Thanksgiving Day every year. In Plymouth, Massachusetts, Indigenous people observe the holiday as a "Day of Mourning." This year will mark the 50th anniversary of this Day of Mourning tradition, and the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth.*²

The Mayflower landed in Plymouth in 1620 and it's now 2020 – 400 years. I'm grateful to my colleague in ministry, Rev. Susan, the president of our national association, the Unitarian Universalist Association. She is a minister of great compassion and wisdom. The UUA has organized a whole week of activities including films

and panel discussions. I'm grateful to Stacey Pattison, our Facebook coordinator, for posting this on our Facebook page. These events started last Thursday and culminate next Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, with the Day of Mourning event. This is an important way to think about Thanksgiving and to re-think it.

I want to connect what I was just talking about with Healing. healing is the theme for the month of November. Last week our worship service was about healing within: how we can offer ourselves healing? Next week our worship service will be about healing the community: how can turn our healing power outward to a hurting world?

When we look at indigenous rights and the history of Thanksgiving through that lens of mourning, we are healing. Those of us like myself, whose ancestors were the ones who colonized the land and took over the land, we need to name the harm that was done to those ancestors who were already living on the land—through that naming we can begin to heal ourselves and offer the spirit of healing to indigenous people today. We as white people—and I'm speaking for myself here—have a lot of healing to do. We have to heal ourselves from the harm that has been done by racism.

And Thanksgiving is a holiday of gratitude. As Susan Frederick Gray says,

*This year, let us be grateful in a genuine manner. Let our gratitude flow from our deep, ongoing commitment to justice and equity. Let our gratitude grow from the opportunities we have to be together authentically—whether virtually or in person.*³

So what are you grateful for? In a moment we will hear these answers. Kendra will invite the youngsters gathered here today to speak out loud what you are grateful for. I will invite the adults who are gathered here to write into the chat box what you are grateful for—not now, but in a minute. Before we do that, I want to say that gratitude itself is healing.

Gratitude is healing. It is a way in which we can heal ourselves. Research has shown that if you take a group of people who are depressed, and you encourage some of them to practice gratitude – writing letters to people they are grateful for – this group of people ends up less depressed and more happy.⁴ Gratitude is good for your mental health. Some people keep a gratitude journal where they list things they're grateful for; some people have gratitude as a focus of their regular prayer or meditation. The sort of cliché of prayer that comes to my mind is a child kneeling by his or her bed, and saying “thank you God for...this, and thank you god for this...” a prayer of gratitude. A practice of gratitude to the divine, however you understand that; a practice of gratitude for other people—these practices are healing. Gratitude opens our hearts to kindness, and that's a beautiful thing.

Happy Harvest Feast. Happy Thanksgiving. I'm looking forward to hearing what you are grateful for, and at this we will hear from the youngsters in our Fellowship.

¹ “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” Traditional. Appears as hymn #407 in Singing the Living Tradition, Unitarian Universalist Association. Beacon Press, Boston. 1993.

² “Honoring Indigenous Ancestors, Experiences and Traditions,” Susan Frederick Gray. Nov. 12, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/honoring-indigenous-ancestors>

³ “Honoring Indigenous Ancestors, Experiences and Traditions,” Susan Frederick Gray. Nov. 12, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/honoring-indigenous-ancestors>

⁴ “How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain,” Joshua Brown and Joel Wong. June 6, 2017.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain