

Thanksgiving Bread Communion Homily
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This coming week is Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, as we well know is the holiday we most often associate with ‘home.’ It is also the day we most associate with travel. It is, in fact, the busiest travel day of the year. Which would indicate that a good number of people don’t feel at home where they are.

Or maybe it is more confusing than that. Maybe home is more than a place where we get our mail. Where we come home to. For some, home involves a special collection of people. A certain smell in the air. For some an image will come immediately to mind. For others it is anything but clear.

A couple days ago, Barry Whittemore, a friend and colleague, recalled a time when he told some people in his congregation that he was going home for Thanksgiving. Barry was raised in the Appalachian Mountains. They asked him who in his family he was going back to see. He explained that all his family had died or moved away. They asked if he was going to the old family homestead. “No,” he replied and explained how that had been sold a long time ago. They looked puzzled. “Then, when you go there, how do you know you are at home?”

When you go there, how do you know you are at home? Think about that for a minute. What gives a home its ‘home-ness?’ Is it the familiar shape of a certain house? Or the furniture inside? Is it the people who show up there? Or the fact that you are part of the stories they tell? Is it the traditional recipes cooked? Or the smells that evoke memories of times gone by and people past? Is it the neighborhood you know so well? Or the promise of safety it brings – that reminded you that as long as you house, or your street is in view, everything would be okay?

These are good indicators for some. But for others, it is more of a feeling. A feeling of being taken in. A certainty that a place exists where we will not be turned away. Where there always waits the promise of an open door. Or, as Robert Frost once described it, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

I know of a few people who think of home in this way. Though not always in a good way. The sense of ‘having’ to go, and ‘having’ to take us in has a tinge of reluctance to it. Some tension is implied. Many of us have, at one time or another, had a home where we didn’t really want to go, but had no choice. Where they didn’t want to take us, but couldn’t refuse. A home out of obligation.

Unfortunately, not everyone was blessed to be born into a home that felt like the Waltons. Some were born into homes where expectations made living there uncomfortable. We all know people who grew up in families who weren’t happy unless they grew up to become doctors. Or families who expected the boys to be good at sports. Or the girls to be courteous and demure young women. My situation is a variation of this. I was born to a family that already had a boy. I was supposed to be a girl. I was something of a disappointment. So much so, that my mother had a difficult time picking me up for weeks. Yet, there I was. Already shipped from the factory. Not returnable. Like Robert Frost said – I had to go there and they had to take me in.

I’m happy to say that my family learned to love me – they worked hard at it. But one of the things that helped me in the meanwhile was my church. For it gave me a sense of home too.

Not everyone was as lucky as I was – and the children of this church – to be born into a church home that makes such an effort to love them and welcome them when they come through the doors. Some came from religious homes that held out expectations that didn't feel right. That made us feel like we were not at home. And at some point in our life, many of us went off in search of that religious home.

And eventually we wandered into this place. That didn't have the restrictions and conditions of our former religious home. Here where there is openness and freedom. And we looked around and saw that we didn't have to be a certain age to be here. Or a particular color. Or certain class. Or political persuasion. We saw that no one required us to hold a particular set of religious beliefs – or kept us from holding a particular set of religious beliefs. “This is great,” we thought. “A religious home that is really free. That doesn't require anything!”

We discovered, however, overtime, that this wasn't exactly true. That this church does have at least one requirement. That everyone who walks through these doors is asked to make this house a home. We are guests for only a second before we become hosts. And the reason is that the only magic this place has at being a home is what the people here bring to it. Whatever goodness is offered here, whatever godliness is found, comes because of the hearts and hands that walk through these doors. And the only enlightenment bestowed comes from our collective willingness to share our lives thoughtfully, respectfully and generously with one another.

To be faithful in this community, we learned, does not mean we all seek to see and serve God in a particular way. It means we all seek to see the godliness in every person and serve the community which supports the people. To be faithful here does not mean that you helplessly take the truth you are offered; but that you offer the truth you have taken to be helpful. And, above all, being faithful here, means to be good hosts to the people who come after you.

The Unitarians and the Universalists have both, historically, been religious wanderers. Outcasts. The Unitarians were resented by the orthodox church for daring to challenge the notion that humanity was born in sin. Unitarians believe all are born worthy. Universalists were cast out of the mainline church for denying the orthodox doctrine that God loves only some people and is justified in judging the rest into Hell. Universalists believed that all are loved, all are saved, all are welcome.

Barry said these two things were the very things he felt when he stood in the Appalachian Mountains. It was the one place in the world where he felt completely and totally worthy and no one could take that from him. And it was the one place that would always welcome him back. Where he felt there was room for him. Where he belonged. Where he was welcome.

Isn't that why many of us feel like we have found a religious home here? Not the obligation that the church has to take us. Or that we have to go there. But, having been turned away or made to feel uncomfortable in so many other places, we love this place because here we feel worthy. Here we feel welcome.

Unitarians believe all are worthy. Universalists believe all are welcome. Radical inclusivity. Radical hospitality. That's what this religion stands for. Because what people who call this home work for.

In a moment we will share a simple communion. And in the spirit of our beliefs, symbolic of how we practice our faith, it will not be an act of us receiving the holiness from above us or beyond us; but an act of us offering of the holiness within us. It is not the sacrifice of one person's body and blood that grants us spiritual nourishment; but everyone's sacrifice of time and attention. We feed, we nourish, we fend for and we love one another in this community. That is where our salvation comes. That is what makes

us Unitarian Universalist. That is what helps remind us we're a family. That is what tells us, when we come here, that we've come home.

To the Glory of Life.

Communion Instructions:

This communion may be different than others you have known. The bread and grape juice are symbols of how we nourish and care for one another. We will give it to one another (except for some of the smallest among us who will be assisted by our worship associates). It works like this: There will be four lines coming from the four corners of this room to the center. When you get to the front of the line, take a piece of bread and dip it in the grape juice. Then take the basket and the chalice from the person and turn to face the next person and serve them. When they have finished hand the next person the elements and return to your seat.

You need not be Baptized into any particular faith. You needn't be a member of this church. You only need to be willing to take these elements, when they are offered, as a symbol of this community's care. And then, be willing to present them to someone else with that same care. And as you offer it you are invited to speak these words:

“Here, may you find peace of mind and love of neighbor.”