

THANKSGIVING COMMUNION

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Opening—Life is a gift for which we are grateful. We gather in community to celebrate the glories and the mysteries of this great gift.

Thanksgiving time has traditionally been a time of stuffing yourself full of food and giving thanks for all of the riches of the earth. Historians find evidence of this ritual for centuries and centuries. So, who are we to break step with our ancestors?

Let us make this time an occasion of stuffing ourselves and thinking about all the multitude of things we should be thankful for.

My earliest personal memories of Thanksgiving are probably not too different from your own. My family was a little offbeat, but that only adds spice to my memories.

There were three occasions every year, rain or shine, when my mother and my sister and I dressed up in our best clothes and traveled across town to have dinner with my aunt and uncle. My aunt and uncle were childless, so we kind or served as their extended family these three times every year.

The big deal about these occasions was that my aunt was a GREAT cook. My mother, on the other hand, was anything but. My mother's middle name was "oh, well, it'll still take OK." My sisters and I have sworn to have engraved on my mother's tombstone her words that we heard at least once or twice a week, as she continued to over salt our food. "Well, that'll make the beer taste good."

So, for three times each year, we were all pretty excited to visit Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Hugh.

One feasting occasion was Easter which wasn't as good, since Aunt Eleanor insisted on serving lamb—an iffy meal at best, but she also served the lamb on a pewter tray that was shaped exactly like a cute little fluffy lamb. Who could eat, looking at that?

Christmas Day was always a day for eating dinner with Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Hugh, but, even though the food was great, who could eat when we knew all our presents were waiting for us at home? We were never encouraged to take toys along on these visits.

So, the really special day was Thanksgiving, when everything was given over to eating as much as we could.

The tradition was always the same. We would arrive at Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Hugh's house in the late afternoon, dressed to the nines. The first step was us kids got a big glass of Vernor's gingerale. Midwesterners know how special Vernor's is—it's rich strong gingerale. We only got to drink Kool-Aid at home. So, we LOVED Vernor's gingerale. It inevitably made us sneeze as the bubbles reached our noses.

Pretty soon after we arrived, the house really started smelling wonderful. Turkey and pumpkin pie and mashed potatoes and gravy—we just knew there'd be no lumps in the gravy at Aunt Eleanor's house.

We all sat down to dinner—Mother, my sister and me, Uncle Hugh, Aunt Eleanor, and Grandmother, who lived with my Aunt and Uncle for years and years. Grandmother never ever helped with the dinner. Grandmother was above cooking and cleaning.

We sat down to dinner and Uncle Hugh would say a blessing. After which, my mother, in a stage whisper, would always say, "I don't know why he's thanking Jesus for this food—it was Eleanor that spent all day in the kitchen."

And we would dive in. It was heaven. My sister and I would eat so much that we could only lie flat on the floor after dinner, afraid to move because our stomachs would explode. We had to stuff ourselves. We knew how long it would be before we'd taste anything like this again. We absolutely could not move—until we heard Aunt Eleanor turn on the mixer to make the whipped cream for her absolutely perfect pumpkin pies. Then, we were back up to the table for a huge piece of pie and whipped cream. YUM!!

While Mother and her sister were in the kitchen washing dishes and talking, Grandmother and Uncle Hugh and my sister and I would put up the card table and get out four decks of cards for our annual canasta marathons.

These were great fun. But also intensely serious games. No quarter was given because we were just little kids.

Grandmother and Uncle Hugh could not stand each other, even though, or because, they had lived under the same roof for years and years. They had two passions in common that drew them together. One was the Kansas City A's—the only baseball games they would listen to. The other was canasta. We'd play for hours. When the going got truly tense, Grandmother would begin tapping her fingers on the table—a ploy that was sure to bug the stuffing out of Uncle Hugh. So, he in turn would softly whistle through his teeth the Prisoner's Song. She HATED that song. And so it went all evening until Mother dragged us home for another year.

If I hadn't thought you'd laugh me out of town, I'd have asked you all to have brought a deck of cards today and I'd show you how to do Thanksgiving up right.

Offering

COMMUNION: This morning as we share our Thanksgiving communion, let us think about our friends, our families, our Fellowship here. But, most importantly, let us be grateful to the Earth and to Life for all the bounty we are blessed with—the grain, that gives us breads, the fruit that gives us wine, the animals that give us cheese. We are greatly blessed.

As you pass the gifts of the earth to the person sitting next to you, remember also that you are serving and nurturing each other. We are all a part of the bounty of this earth as well.

Please—eat, drink, and reflect.

I've asked Adele to read to you a poem written by Rev. David Bumbaugh. It's titled *Meditation for the Season* and it is a fitting tribute to this time of year.

In late autumn, there are no secrets.

In late autumn, the world is what it is
and there is no time for pretense.

In late autumn, the days are short
and dusk comes early
and nights are long and dark.

In late autumn it is obvious
that light is not the natural state of things;
It is a transient phenomenon
in the midst of environing darkness.

The story is the same story.

Late autumn darkness is not our enemy,
to be hurried through,
to be struggled against and overcome.

Late autumn darkness is an invitation
to enter into the natural cycle,
to see ourselves as part of the great process
which is darkness and light
and life and death
and darkness again.

Late autumn is an invitation
to find that quiet, nurturing, dark place
at the core of our beings,
to rest in that environing darkness
and to wait for something to stir

and to grow and to emerge
 for it is at the margins of existence
 that hope is born and light is kindled.

Because autumn and Thanksgiving will always be tied for me to the mid-west, because that's where I grew up, I thought it appropriate that we hear from Garrison Keillor, the ultimate mid-westerner, and his thoughts about Thanksgiving.

WITH ALL THE TRIMMINGS

It is a wicked world in which the power of any individual to cause suffering is so great and the power to do good is so slight; but here we are, the week of our beloved national feast, our annual homecoming, and signs of loving Providence are everywhere around us.

I am thankful to be alive. In Minnesota the lakes are freezing over in late November, and some men who envision a leadership role for themselves take their snowmobiles out onto the thin ice and fall through and drown in the cold water—their last thought in this life: “Boy, was this dumb or what?”—and so far I have not been one of them. Caution was bred into me; I never played with guns or made a hobby of pharmaceuticals or flung myself off a cliff while clinging to a kite. I read books instead. I read books in which men hearken to wild imperatives, and that is enough for me.

I am thankful for living in a place where winter gets good and cold and you need to build a fire in a stove and wrap a blanket around you. Cold draws people closer together. Crime drops. Acts of kindness proliferate between strangers. I have been in Los Angeles on a balmy day in January and seen the glum faces of people poking at their salads in outdoor restaurants, brooding over their unproduced screenplays. People in Minnesota are much cheerier, lurching across the ice, leaning into the wind as sheets of snow swirl up in their faces. Because they feel needed and because cold weather takes the place of personal guilt. Maybe you haven't been the shining star you should have been, but now is not the time to worry about it.

I am thankful for e-mail, which allows us to keep in touch with our children, and for the ubiquity of fresh coffee, the persistence of good newspapers, the bravery of artists, the small talk of sales clerks, the general competence and good humor I encounter every day. None of us is self-sufficient, despite what the Republicans claim. Every good thing, every morsel of food comes directly from God, who expects us to pay attention and be joyful, a large task for people from the Midwest, where our idea of a compliment is, “It could have been worse.”

I am thankful, of course, for Thanksgiving, a joyful and simple day that never suffered commercial exploitation and so is the same day as when I was a boy and we played touch football on the frozen turf and came to the table sweaty and in

high spirits and kept our eyes open for flying food. My sister had good moves; you'd look away for an instant, and she'd flip her knife and park a pat of butter on your forehead. Nobody throws food at our table now, but in the giddiness of the festive moment, I have held a spoonful of cranberry for a moment and measured the distance to Uncle Earl, his gleaming head, like El Capitan, bent over the plate.

As I grew up, Thanksgiving evolved perfectly. It used to be that men had the hard work, which is to sit in the living room and make conversation about gas mileage and lower back pain, and women got the good job, which is cooking. Women owned the franchise, and men milled around the trough mooing, and if any man dared enter the kitchen, he was watched closely lest he touch something and damage it permanently. But I bided my time, and the aunts who ran the show grew old, and young, liberated lady relatives came along who were proud of their inability to cook, and one year I revolted and took over the kitchen—and now I am It. The Big Turkey. Mr. Masher. The Pie Man.

Except for gravy and pie crust, which take patience and practice, Thanksgiving dinner is as easy to make as it is to eat. You're a right-handed batter in a park that's 150 feet down the left-field line—it doesn't take a genius to poke it out.

Years of selective breeding have produced turkeys that are nothing but cooking pouches with legs. You rub the bird's inside with lemon, stuff it with bread dressing seasoned with sage and tarragon and jazzed up with chunks of sausage and nuts and wild rice, shove it in a hot oven; meanwhile, you whomp up yams and spuds and bake your pies. The dirty little secret of the dinner is melted animal fats: in all the recipes, somewhere it says, "Melt a quarter pound of butter."

Think of the fancy dishes you slaved over that became disaster, big dishes that were lost in the late innings. Here's roast turkey, which tastes great, and all you do is baste. You melt butter, you nip at the wine, and when the turkey is done, you seat everyone, carve the bird, sing the doxology and pass the food.

The candles are lit in the winter dusk, and we look at one another, the old faces and some new ones, and silently toast the Good Life, which is here before us. Enjoy the animal fats and to hell with apologies. No need to defend our opinions or pretend to be young and brilliant. We still have our faculties, and the food still tastes good to us.

Walt Whitman said, "I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name." Thanksgiving is one of those signed letters. Anyone can open it and see what it says.

And finally, this is a poem which I wish I had written, that talks about friends and how very glad we are to have them in our lives. I'm sure you'll recognize your friends in these words.

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people.

For children whom are our second planting, and though they grow like weeds
And the wind too soon blows them away,
May they forgive us our cultivation
And remember fondly where their roots are.

Let us give thanks—

For generous friends...with hearts as big as pumpkins
And smiles as bright as their blossoms

For feisty friends as tart as apples,

For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers,
Keep reminding us that we've had them,

For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible,

For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants
And as elegant as a row of corn,

And the others, as plain as potatoes and so good for you,

For funny friends, who are as silly as Brussels sprouts
And as amusing as Jerusalem artichokes,

And serious friends, as complex as cauliflowers
And as intricate as onions.

For friends as unpretentious as cabbages,
As subtle as summer squash,
As persistent as parsley,
As delightful as dill,
As endless as zucchini,
And who, like parsnips, can be counted on to see you through the winter,

For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening time

And young friends, coming on as fast as radishes,

For loving friends, who wind around us like tendrils and hold us,
Despite our blights, wilts, and witherings,

And, finally, for those friends now gone
Like gardens past that have been harvested

But who fed us in their times
That we might have life thereafter.

For all these, we give thanks.

Happy Thanksgiving!