



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“How We Are Fed: A Bread Communion Service”

Delivered 20 November 2022

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

At the Thanksgiving dinners of my childhood, it was my grandmother who always said grace before the meal. This was my mother’s mother, born and raised in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. She was a deeply faithful person her entire life, and when it was time for grace on Thanksgiving she shared that with us. *A lot*. For, like, a really long time. My grandmother prayed with great sincerity, without artifice, with nothing but real joy and love pouring from her heart and her lips, praising the God of her understanding for the gracious gifts of our table, giving thanks for all we had. But, like, A LOT. My grandmother’s graces were legendary. She would begin softly, get into a rhythm, picking up pace and volume, naming the gritudes, and never hesitating to add a new one as she spoke - “Oh, Lord, one more thing!” My brother and I would often share strained facial expressions across the table. “Grandma really knocked it out of the park this time!” we’d joke later.

Until the first year she wasn’t with us to say that grace. Until the first year we looked at each other around the table to say, “Well, who does this now?” For many years, that role fell to my father. And since his death, it now falls to me.

It’s a sacred trust, being the gratitude-counter of the family. And it is a responsibility. Around our annual Thanksgiving table we have people with varying different spiritual outlooks, coming from different life circumstances, representing many stages of life - and my family is small! How do we speak the truth that lives within our own hearts? The truth of gratitude mixed with sorrow for those who do not share the abundance that we do. The truth of wanting to uplift a holiday of thankfulness while also holding the complicated and ugly truth of the genocide of Native American peoples that is too often

glossed over with the myth of the “First Thanksgiving” story. How do we hold it all at the same time?

Every family, every community that comes together in praise and gratitude, must come to their own terms with this balance. The words of our Bread Communion blessing today suggest one way: “As this bread was once scattered across the field, and thence, through the effort of work, gathered and brought forth to this table as nourishment, so may the people of our common earth, scattered across the fields, be gathered through the marvelous effort of mercy into a world where neither nourishment, nor justice, nor love is rare.”

A world where neither nourishment nor justice nor love is rare. What an amazing shared world to consider!

And every time I read this blessing, every time I read this language about the work that brings about the food we share, the symbolic meal we took together today brings me back to the faith of my own childhood.

In Christian churches, communion with bread (and often wine or grape juice) is a more common practice. It is often the centerpiece of Christian worship, echoing back to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper - take this bread, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.

Fruit of the earth, work of human hands.

Isn't all bread the bread of life?

How separate are the spirit and the body, after all?

This is an extremely ancient theological question. Do we long for spiritual experiences outside our bodies? Or do we celebrate our bodies as temples, the grand vessels of our spirits? Or is even that too separate, ignoring the miraculous alchemy of that which animates us, that living spirit we can neither measure nor understand, that is as reliant on our nourished bodies as are our hearts and lungs?

When my grandmother spoke to the God of her understanding, when the well of gratitude overflowed from her at the Thanksgiving table, I thought about this. I was having a spiritual experience at an abundant table, but what about the people who are going hungry right now? What about our neighbors who do not gather in abundance? Hunger in the human body also means hunger in the human spirit, a loss of whole-ness, of the grounded safe haven needed for the experience of humanity - body AND soul - truly to soar.

To return to our reading, which is from Rev. Anna Blaedel writing for enfleshed, we hear:

“Emmanuel teaches us: when we do not know, exactly, what comes next:
feed each other
break the bread
share the cup
taste and see
daily bread
manna in the dessert
bread of life
soul food

So. Trusting the food to nourish our bodies and this time together to nourish our souls:

we give thanks to this land that grew it
we give thanks for the hands that prepared it
we cup our hands, preparing to receive this offering
of generosity
of care
of sustenance

Because we are companions on this journey.
Companions. Com-panis. With bread.

With bread
we remember
we are nourished
we feed each other, and are fed
we feast together.
May it be so.”

We hear Christian language in this reading, which I hope does not stand as a barrier to you in feeling the spirit moving within it. Look to the god of your own understanding, to whatever sense you have of obligation, love, and connectedness to that which is greater than us all, and hear the words: “With bread / we remember / we are nourished / we feed each other, and are fed / we feast together. May it be so.” For we are companions on the journey!

The etymology of “companion” is right there in the reading too - “com” meaning with, “panis” meaning bread in the Latin roots. We make real connection when we break bread with one another. We have made real connection here today, and that connection grows within our hearts every time we reinforce it. This is the journey of shared faith. This is the value of spiritual community - to remind ourselves no matter where we are on our own spiritual path, we have companions.

We give thanks to the land and the labor that prepared our abundant tables. We receive with love and gratitude. We give thanks for companions on each journey, those at our table and those in our memory, those nearby and those far away. We celebrate the miracle of a nourished body and a nourished soul, inseparable, sacred.

We give thanks.

So may it be.