

## Thanksgiving Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda: Gratitude for Harvest Home

Sunday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

Musicians Carabel Ringrose, with Bill Baylis

Thanksgiving was celebrated at the 10:30 am service in the historic Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, founded in 1880 as a Universalist Congregation, confident that love is a more positive force for good than fear.

Opening words, #515 in our hymnal, “We Lift Our Hearts in Thanks”

Opening Hymn, #349 “We Gather Together”

The Chalice was lit as a symbol of the warmth of love, our aspirations and our religious ideals, for freedom and fellowship, for inclusiveness and community, for responsible and courageous service to humanity.

The Story for All Ages was taken from the twelfth chapter of Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn”, as Jim and Huck drift down the river on their raft, a cozy home, snug upon the waters, with a makeshift hearth for the cooking of catfish and the occasional wandering chicken.

Lay Chaplain Joyse Gilbert invited us into a quiet time for meditation and prayer with Jane Kenyon’s poem, “Otherwise”—how we wake each morning and pass our days in awareness of happiness, knowing that one day it will be otherwise—how transitory our joys, and all the more precious for it

We emerged from meditation with autumn words of poet Rabindrinath Tagore, #540 in the hymnal, “The Peace of Autumn”: stillness, dust, nature and field, our own bodies—the dance of atoms through endless time, through worlds seen and unseen.

Reflective Hymn, #128 “For All That Is Our Life”

The Offering was invited and received, with Carabel’s Offertory, “It’s a Wonderful World”

Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman shared a homily based on a story from ancient Greece, and the many faces of prayer; perhaps Mark Twain’s story about Jim and Huck Finn was in a way a sort of prayer, for the imagining of a better world....

HOMILY: When enough is enough: Erysikhthon Great Hall and Demeter’s Grove

Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

Homily for Thanksgiving at Olinda, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2016

Once upon a time in ancient Greece, long ago and far away, there was a story—one of those stories where strange things happen. This story was about Erysikhthon, the king of Thessaly, for whom nothing was ever enough. Erysikhthon liked to eat. For him every day was like a Thanksgiving banquet and more.

Erysikhthon decided he wanted to build a huge feasting hall. He cast his eyes upon a grove of fine tall trees. He told his servants, “Cut down all those trees for my new feasting hall”.

His servants protested—those trees were sacred to the goddess Demeter, the goddess of good harvests. But Erysikhthon—his name in Greek means ‘tearing up the earth’—Erysikhthon insisted that every last tree in Demeter’s sacred grove be cut down to build his feasting hall, and so it was done.

One day soon after, Demeter came walking past, and noticed that her beautiful trees had been cut down to build Erysikhthon’s banquet hall. And she was annoyed. Demeter said to the greedy king that since he liked eating so much, then he could eat all he liked, but no matter how much he ate, he would never feel full. And so Erysikhthon ate and he ate and he ate, but he never felt full, and there was no end to his hunger, and he knew no peace, for he didn’t know when enough was enough.

And that’s the story of Erysikhthon, ‘he who tears up the earth’, and for all I know he’s still eating and he’s still hungry.

This idea of enough is difficult for us humans. It is in our nature always to be looking further afield, always to be interested in new things, always to want something more. And this can be a good thing. This is how we are hungry to learn, and hungry to do good in the world.

Fortunately it is also in our nature to be mindful of good things close to home, and to be thankful for what we already have. We look for ways to show our thanks for life, and the people who love us, and the beautiful world we live in.

One way we show our thanks is prayer. Prayer is one of those words that can mean different things to different people. Some of us pray by taking long walks in the woods, and up into the mountains. We stop and breathe the air, and we are thankful for the beauty of the earth and the splendour of the skies.

Some of us show our thanks by praying aloud. We might speak our words to what we name as God or the spirit of life. We might talk out loud to the universe and the starry skies, or listen to the wind blowing through the trees.

We might talk silently to ourselves, searching for the words to say how we feel today, if we are happy or sad, if we are hopeful or afraid, if we feel lonely or uncertain. Sometimes finding the words and saying them out loud helps us feel more calm, and think more clearly. Speaking the words out loud might help us find the courage and strength to do what we need to do.

Sometimes sitting in silence, breathing in and out, and just being in the quiet is what we want to do. Folks call that meditation. When I feel scattered all over the place, I sit in stillness and in silence for a while, until I feel more at peace, as if all the pieces of me had come back together.

Prayer or meditation or mindfulness is a personal thing; we do what we do, each in our own way.

At Thanksgiving I remember that not everyone has enough. So I remember the food bank and I say thank you by sharing, and that too could be called a prayer for the healing of the world.

It has been said that if the only prayer we ever spoke was thank you, it would be enough.

May it be so.  
FD/fd

*[The legend of Erysichthon's insatiable hunger as punishment for the felling of Demeter's sacred grove is found at Callimachus hymn 6 in the Greek, and at various sites on the world wide web.]*

Rev. Fran then proceeded to a Reflection on Thanksgiving and the many forms that might take.

REFLECTION on Thanksgiving  
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman  
Olinda, Sunday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Thanksgiving is an interesting holiday—its roots both religious and civic; we give thanks as individuals, as communities, and as nations. Our neighbours who worship in the Jewish tradition observe New Year at about this time—Rosh ha Shana—the beginning of the year. I began to understand this sense of fall as beginning when I was doing archaeology in the Middle East, in Jordan, in 1995—I saw people and horses out in the fields ploughing, and planting winter wheat, for it was in October and November that the rains would come.

The Jewish New Year celebrations take about a week, and are completed with Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement—at-one-ment. At-One-Ment—a time for returning to right relation with the holy and with one's neighbours. People search their hearts, offer apologies where they have missed the mark, and seek to make amends, for things done that ought not to have been done, for things left undone that ought to have been done.

[The Olinda congregation then read from the hymnal, #637 Litany of Atonement: For all we have done that has kept us apart—We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.]

Our neighbours in the United States observe Columbus Day at this time, and that this observation had increasingly become a focus for re-examining national relationships with indigenous peoples, including federal relationships with First Nations peoples here in Canada.

We recalled that the founder of the Olinda Congregation, Matthew Fox, was especially mindful of his relationship with First Nations peoples. As are many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations here in Canada.

These words of gathering articulated by the Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon, (used here with permission).

Words of gathering from Liz James, Unitarian congregation of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan:

“We gather with gratitude this morning on Treaty Six and Metis territory.

A treaty is an inheritance, a responsibility, and a relationship.

May we be good neighbours to one another, good stewards to our planet, and good ancestors to all our children.”

Words of gathering used at Saskatoon, from Liz James, October 2016

Rev. Fran continued:

In love and in gratitude let us offer our own appreciation for food and health, for peace and justice, for the love family and friends and community.

Once, when I was on vacation in England, walking the towpaths along the banks of the River Thames, I came upon a thick-walled church that was almost a thousand years old. The people there invited me to attend their worship service that evening, their service of Thanksgiving for Harvest Home.

We gathered at dusk, walking in through the trees to the old church by the river, meeting the dairy cows as they came home for milking time. In the old church with the thick walls there was

no electricity or heating. People brought in flashlights—torches they call them in England. The minister and the service leaders read by the light of a big hissing Coleman Lantern.

We rang the bells before the service for all to hear—an invitation to join us in this act of gratitude.

There was grain and vegetables from the nearby farms and fields, on the altar and along the window ledges, much as we see here today, at our own service this morning.

After the service we walked back out to the road. There was a tawny fox flashed past us in the moonlight and ran quickly into the woods.

I've never forgotten that evening—bells and lanterns, cattle and apples and the tawny fox. And that the folks of these fields had sung their gratitude in this church for almost a thousand years.

To shape words of thanksgiving for harvest home is a deeply human custom.

FD/fd

There was a final Reading, about the intensity of commitment and endurance that goes into farming, especially in the early days of settlement in Ontario—the chapter entitled “Cattail”, pages 55-61 in Helen Humphreys’ “The River”, 2015.

Our closing hymn, #164 “the Peace Not Past Our Understanding” was written by a Unitarian poet called John Holmes, who lived through the Great Depression and two world wars. He heard some folks said that the only peace we could ever know would be beyond our understanding, in another world. But John Holmes reckoned he did know what peace looked like, peace in this world—to be safe in our own homes and not be afraid, to share a meal, and let the light shine out our windows. He wrote a poem about this kind of peace, and the poem was set to music.

*[Hymn # 164 “The Peace Not Past Our Understanding”. The poet alludes to Philippians 4:7 KJV “And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep [guard, make serene] your hearts and minds through [in] Christ Jesus.”]*

Meister Eckhart once said that if the only prayer we ever spoke was Thank You, it would be enough. Best wishes to you and yours for peace, for reverence, for gratitude and love, for enough, and a little more, for serenity, for Thanksgiving, this day, and all days.—Rev. Fran. October, 2016.