

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
Thanksgiving Sunday 2010
John 6:25-35

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
November 21, 2010
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On Tuesday, we gather with old friends and new from our sister congregation, University Synagogue to give thanks together. They are looking forward to being with us, and I hope you will mark your calendar to come and welcome old friends and new for this most special joint service of the year. Our choirs will perform together, and the service and reception afterward is a favorite of many. The speaker is Dr. Jerry Campbell, who took my alma mater, the Claremont School of Theology, and helped transform it into an inter-religious campus.

The seminary's website reads, "We see a model of theological education in which students are educated rigorously and intensively in their own religious traditions and in contact with the other religious traditions that are thriving throughout our society. We aim to instill our students with a strong sense of their own religious identities and the integrity of the religious traditions that they represent, while simultaneously teaching them to recognize the legitimacy and integrity of the other religious traditions which they will encounter in the world." It should be an interesting evening.

Today is the last Sunday in the church calendar. After giving thanks for the blessings of this year, next week we will return here to find the decorations and deep colors of Advent in this room and the lighting of the first Advent candle.

The children of the church will prepare the song and story of the season; small prophets letting us know in nervous preparation that a new year will unfold before us once again after all, and they will lead it for us; this season of hope, peace, joy and love. May this time of year, beginning today in Thanksgiving, open hearts that have been suffering in these difficult times.

In today's reading, taking place on a mountainside near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus finished feeding the 5,000. He has now crossed over to the other side of the sea, according to the story, in a most remarkable way. In this concluding part of the story, he reminds the people there not to work for the bread that perishes, but as I read it, for the nourishment that ties us all into the recognition that we are part of something much greater than the mundanity into which we often find ourselves so self-imposed.

Jesus reminds the people that when they were in exile, the manna that fell from heaven (which was, in fact, an edible substance that fell in the night from trees) did not come from their leader, Moses, but was food for the journey giving life to the world, from the Creator.

As it was then, it is now—some of us spend too much time worrying about what we can glean from the most ordinary of sources just to get by, when the resources we have are always more abundant than we remember to believe.

I think that Thanksgiving is a wonderful time to be reminded that there is so much more around us that touches and lifts our lives—particularly when we need to be prodded into the recognition that our time is precious and that life is a gift.

One of the most remarkable Thanksgiving seasons I ever felt was in New York City during November of 2001.

When I lived there, I spent as much time as I could in Central Park, the most beautiful park in the world. The night before Thanksgiving, friends and family bundle up and go down to the lawns around the Museum of Natural History to see the giant balloons being inflated for Macy's Parade the next day; watching each familiar old friend rise up past the pre-war apartment buildings all around the park to be tethered on an impossible number of ropes until the next morning would catch them coming around the corner for the cameras onto Central Park West.

But on this particular November, I was visiting my old city, shaken and bruised from the terrorist attacks. My friends were angry, sad, emotional...and something else. They noticed everything around them that reminded them of how fortunate they were to be alive and to still have their beautiful city.

This was an unusually glorious autumn in New York, and again, I spent as much time in Central Park with friends as I could. The leaves were brilliant, and I observed the people of the city as much as I did everything else.

I wondered if it was my imagination, or were the faces of these people looking around in wonder as much as I was—stopping to look up at trees full of bright yellows and reds, pointing at the sights from atop Belvedere Castle, gazing across the boat pond, almost, but not entirely empty of its small model sailing ships. Was it just me; or was the park being explored with new eyes and a sense of wonder in rebirth; people nearly crying out to say that a new day was coming soon, indeed was palpable in the fall air?

Is that what was different on a weekend day in Central Park in autumn after such senseless and devastating acts of terrorism? Faces were alive with expectation. Aren't the leaves beautiful? Each child that passed in a stroller or skipped behind a parent...wasn't that the most lovely, or interesting, or funny child you ever saw? People didn't amble—they walked with expectation. Quick! Go to the statue of the King of Poland! Don't miss the folk dancing there! You must see the newest performance artist under the 72nd Street colonnade! He wears a makeshift Aztec costume, plays the violin and howls. Meanwhile, turn around and Korean couples in bridal costume line up to have their pictures taken in front of the angel with outstretched arms over the Bethesda Fountain. Oh, don't miss it—don't miss any of it.

Church is two hours long at Riverside, and what a delight to see my former church with over a thousand people being lifted up by that wonderful worship.

But that Sunday, Dr. James Forbes got up in the pulpit and talked about the tragedy. He also asked us if we hadn't noticed that the autumn was particularly beautiful this year, and the church responded. He asked us if we hadn't started looking up at the city as he had and finding ourselves seeing architectural elements we had never noticed before, and the church responded. He then said, "Isn't this a beautiful city?" And the congregation shouted back. He said that it reminded him of that old spiritual, "O Lord, What a Beautiful City, Twelve Gates to the City, Alleluia" and proceeded to ask a wonderful singer to get up and sing it for us in place of his sermon. Then he asked us to talk to each other about this beautiful city, and everyone jumped into doing it.

Now, Dr. Forbes is listed as one of the twelve best preachers in the country, and I could have felt a bit cheated, but suddenly it all made sense. And for those days I was a New Yorker again. I could take the subway down after church and I could witness what had been done to my city.

I could look down at the dust and the mud and know that the DNA of thousands of New Yorkers was at my feet and I could feel great despair. I could look waist-level and see all the tsochke-junk being sold for a buck by sidewalk vendors who saw in tragedy an opportunity to make money. And I could look through side streets at the gaping holes in the city, and then up into the eyes of New Yorkers and others and see and share the tremendous humanity in eyes filled with pain, welling mirrors of humanness that conveyed so much care, and could hardly contain, as could mine, what it was that we felt drawn to witness for whatever reasons compelled us there. For me, I needed to see and understand for myself what such evil acts could destroy before I could talk about peace again and feel genuine doing so.

But the thing I remember most from being there, besides the smell in the air and the broken windows for blocks around—was that all of us who were there looked up. At what? The blue sky seemed so out of context with the bleakness of the surroundings and the absence of light in the souls who dreamed this surreal landscape into being.

The act of looking up into the light from the ashes on the ground seemed a logical step. It was boundless sky and universe, carrying us out of the shared pain and connecting us somehow with all that is. The line from the ground to the sky continued from ashes to infinity.

And, I think to myself now, whatever may be ultimately said, life is all we have. What is important is in front of us here and now, and it is precious.

Now some people here understand that in this season—some of you may know that feeling that follows being in crisis or particularly difficult period—the things people say to you hold more importance, and the world appears to be more vivid and almost overpowering.

Others of us may be feeling as if we are marking time through this week—another Thanksgiving, another dinner arrangement or quiet time at home, perhaps a holiday movie—nothing special. No particular thing to lift up, remember...or give thanks for out of the ordinary.

Perhaps it is a painful time...a solitary time...holidays are hard for some people, and it is at this time we need to be reminded to reach out to each other and make sure there is a connection, a sense of “family.”

The bread we give thanks for isn't the stuff in the grocery store or at the bakery. It is in the breaking, passing and sharing of the stuff that holds us together as spiritual beings—reminding us of our interconnection with everything that is, and found in those moments of wonder that lift us up and compel us to remember that there is so much to be thankful for.

Have you noticed what a beautiful place this is to be able to live in?

Have you noticed that the autumn is particularly beautiful this year?

Have you taken time to look up and see the world around you in all of its perfect natural wonder and felt the richness of it and paused to consider how you happened to be fortunate enough to be a part of it all; aches, pains, illnesses, relationship or lack-of relationship difficulties, financial stresses, worries for the future, regrets about the past, concerns for the present, anger about politics or personal slights aside?

The greatest Thanksgiving I saw was in New York in the autumn of 2001, two months after the worst tragedy that ever hit the city. “My Lord, What a Beautiful City.” I *heard* them say and sing it in loud acclamation in church. I watched them looking up at the divine in every burning red tree, or in bright yellow maple. Drinking in whirling dancers under the crossed swords of the statue of the Polish King, or finding beauty in every child, the city's spirit was alive and looking forward. On the streets, instead of looking slightly down and away as we were taught, to now look up; as Paul Simon sang, “seeing angels in the architecture, spinning in infinity, singing amen, alleluia.”

It's the spirit within us that no matter what finds cause to be so appreciative that the gratitude has to erupt from the body in praise. It is the indomitable stuff of life, as Jesus explained, “the bread of God that gives life to the world.” To which the people said, “Sir, give us *this* bread always.”

There is always something to be thankful for. There is always more bread for the journey. Happy Thanksgiving.

Scripture for Sunday, November 21, 2010

John 6:25-35

25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” 28 Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” 30 So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ “ 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” 35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Dedication of the Chancel Wall

A few years ago, with the blessing of some of our families, our leadership voted to put aside undesignated memorial funds for finishing the chancel area of the sanctuary with furnishings that are appropriate to our space. We hired a designer, Jeff Tortorelli, and the chancel wall is the second piece we have commissioned from him.

After looking at our space and listening to how we understand our own Christian path, Jeff decided to incorporate the triangular shapes in our geodesic dome in the form of mountains on our back wall. They represent the “Sermon on the Mount,” and reflect our emphasis on the earthly aspects of Jesus’ teaching, healing and message of radical welcome to all.

The wall provides an anchor and a focus to our chancel, as well as a sounding board for the beautiful music of our choir.

Hal Thompson was a longtime choir member, key leader, friend, and guiding force behind the building of our sanctuary. Joan is here to say a word about him and this dedication.

Michael Spindle is the other half of this dedication. Michael has served here for many years as a member of the church, and for over ten years as our administrator. Michael is a great friend and the most capable administrator we could ever hope for, watching over us in great detail covering multiple aspects of the life of the church, with dedication, humor and love. It was decided by his many friends and our leaders at IUCC to honor him with a party for his decade of service to his church, and to use the gifts from that event to help create this piece of art.

And so, now, we dedicate this chancel wall to being followers of Jesus. We do it in memory of Hal Thompson, a beloved friend and builder of this community; and in honor of Michael Spindle, whose dedication to IUCC makes him one of our church's most invaluable treasures.

And the people all said, “Amen.”