



First United Church of Oak Park

Happy Thanksgiving

Psalm 100, Philippians 4: 5-7

The Rev. Beth Dickerson

November 22, 2020

I want to thank John for his warm introduction this morning. I'm thankful and honored for the opportunity to preach at First United Church. As John said, my name is Beth Dickerson. I'm a retired UCC minister, having served five churches in the last eleven years as their Interim Pastor. I'm here at First United, as you all are, in a volunteer capacity. I hope to use my pastoral gifts and skills to support the staff in their work, and I hope the congregation is also supported and enriched by my ministry.

I have two themes this morning that I want to talk about. This Sunday before Thanksgiving, we are moving into what's going to be a rough holiday season. We are all dealing with loss. Many of our families are reconfigured this holiday due to either death or necessary physical distancing. In many homes, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner won't be the same without Nana or Grandpa or Dad or Mom or Uncle Henry or cousin David. The younger among us have lost the opportunity to be with friends at school and we've all lost the opportunity to be with both friends and family over the holidays because of this horrible COVID-19 virus.

The second theme I'm going to talk about is a much more cheerful subject. That is the good news of First United Church as it transforms even further into a Community of Caring. I'll be talking about what that means, Community of Caring, and how First United Church already embodies this concept and how it might do better.

But first, let's get back to the holidays.

The picturesque bare tree limbs have long ushered in the Thanksgiving season for me. As a child growing up in Clarendon Hills, the drive to my grandparents' house in River Forest and the gracefulness of the trees in Thatcher Woods brought peace to my heart. On Thanksgiving Day, I knew at my grandparents'

there would be a large gathering of relatives, both my favorites — and least favorites — all in one place. It would be a mixture of those people I hoped to stay around most of the day and those I wanted to avoid.

I don't really remember the food on Thanksgiving, save for a few pies. I don't really remember the awkward conversations. I do, however, remember feeling like I was a part of something much larger than myself. I was a piece of a puzzle that was partially completed when the family gathered together. I saw where much of my personality and heart came from. I also saw the origin of the unfortunate sides of my personality as well. All in all, Thanksgiving was a time to set aside and be thankful for what had gone before and where we might go in the coming days and years. Thanksgiving was meant to refocus on what we had to be thankful for, but it also taught me to be thankful for the people who were present in that moment, at that time, and for many people who are now gone.

This year things are going to be different for many of us. Thanksgiving is still a time to be thankful for all that we have, including a God who welcomes us as part of the Divine's beloved community. But, and here's the rub, I have to admit that a Zoom Thanksgiving dinner with the family just doesn't quite cut it for me. Since we're what the governor of Illinois calls "senior citizens," our three adult children are being very protective of my husband and me. They are encouraging us to socially distance this Thanksgiving — no going to their homes and they are refusing to come to ours. Not that our children are wrong. Of course, they are right. My husband Paul and I appreciate their love and concern, but that doesn't mean we are looking forward to being alone in our Oak Park condo this coming Thursday.

I admit I'm preaching to myself as I say that as we move into celebrating this holiday season, we can't help but look back on how things used to be. Things are going to be different this year, and it's OK to allow ourselves to feel gloomy. It's important that we name and claim our feelings of loss and grief. If we bury our sorrow or pretend everything is fine when it's not, we cannot move past what used to be. The truth of the matter is that emotions not recognized and expressed freeze us in time. Endings must be dealt with if we are to move forward to whatever comes next in our lives. For some of us, this holiday season means letting go of the family we have been. We do this by acknowledging our sadness and our losses. We will miss many dearly beloved people this year. I pray that for all of us, our memories of the past and those we have lost will

continue to bless our lives as we move forward to whatever blessings God has in store for us this holiday season.

At family and holiday gatherings, and at church, I might add, we don't so much remember what people say but how they made us feel. We feel we belong and are cared for when someone pays full attention to us by stopping what they are doing, making eye contact with us, and nodding their head. We feel understood when someone paraphrases what we are saying. We feel heard when our feelings are reflected back to us with comments such as, "I can tell this is really hard for you," or "That sure is a frustrating situation," or "You must be proud of that!"

We all need to feel we are a part of what sociologists call a tribe. Merriam-Webster defines a tribe as "a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader." When we are adolescents or young adults, we may want to break away from our tribe for a while. There's nothing wrong with that. But when push comes to shove, when the going gets rough, most of us yearn for our tribe to get us through the hard times.

When others have so little and we have so much it feels almost selfish to be thankful this year. One of the things we are most thankful for is our church community — our tribe. Many of you here at First United have a bond that cannot be broken with your fellow congregants. And this has helped you through many a tough time and is helping you get through a tough time now.

I suspect, though, there are people at First United who feel disconnected from the past and who feel emotionally disconnected from the church. The trouble with tribes is that they can be exclusive rather than inclusive. I'm aware as a church newcomer reading the Sunday morning chat that I have no idea sometimes who is doing the talking and who is being prayed for. Part of that is COVID — I haven't had a lot of time to meet people in person. But I have a suspicion that I'm not alone in feeling sometimes that I'm not part of the in-crowd. Certainly, I'm not suggesting that people stop sharing during the Sunday morning chat! Good grief! That's a very important part of worship and community building at First United. But I encourage all of us to be sensitive to the fact that not everyone feels part of the First United tribe.

The good news is that First United Church is living into being a more robust Community of Care. You may be aware our church staff and lay leaders have been busily looking forward during this strange, liminal, in-between time. Some wonderful things are happening at this church. People who are homebound have been able to attend worship. Congregants who have moved away are once again back with us worshipping and participating in book and Bible studies. People who may not usually attend church every Sunday are regularly among us as part of our worshipping community. In other words, our Community of Care is actually expanding during this pandemic.

First United has always been a caring, compassionate church. When my mentor and dear friend, Lead Pastor Julie Harley, was struggling with ALS, the members of First United responded in droves with love, food, cherished visits, financial assistance, and prayers as they assisted Julie through her illness until her death.

The glue that allows us to survive as a species and makes us a Community of Care is compassion. Compassion is defined as “recognizing suffering in oneself and others.” In these times of COVID, it’s good to know that when we are compassionate with others, we bolster our own immune systems. Bonding, nurturing, and attachment lowers inflammation in the body, which in turn makes us healthier. In a trusting, caring environment, such as First United Church at its best, our stress level goes down, which significantly reduces anxiety and depression. And the even better news is that we don’t have to wait until someone is compassionate toward us. It’s by *exercising compassion* that we enable ourselves to literally heal physiologically and psychologically. We manifest our own reality by being kind, thoughtful people.

Sallie Smylie, our Church Moderator, says (and I quote her), “Our Community of Care at First United is framed by our belief that we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ to promote the betterment and spiritual growth of others as modeled by the life and ministry of Christ.” In my time at First United I’ve seen congregants realizing that it is not only the responsibility of the clergy to comfort and bring the message of God’s love to the congregation, it is the responsibility of all of us to do the same. Modeling ourselves after the actions of Jesus, being extraordinarily compassionate and caring people is a wonderful goal for all of us.

It can be frightening to feel alone and anxious. To those of you who do feel alone, as if no one really knows you or cares about you, I’m here to tell you this

morning: Do not be afraid; both the church and our God are near! And I am here. This is why my position was created. My purpose at First United Church is to connect with you. I want to get to know you, personally and intimately. I invite you to call the church office and tell them you would like me to call you. Or, if you're more comfortable doing so, send me an email. I'm delighted to connect with you at any time. And like all the staff at First United, I welcome the opportunity to pray for you.

As we close, as our Psalmist suggests, "I implore you, with prayers of thanksgiving, to let your requests be known to God." We all belong to God. This Thanksgiving I pray that the peace of God be revealed to all of the people of First United Church. And on Thursday of this week, let's enter the gates of the Divine with thanksgiving for all we have to be thankful for.

Blessed be, and thanks be to God and to all of you.

Amen.