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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Luke 14:7-24
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Pass the Grace Please: The Words That Come Before All Else

Let gratitude be the pillow Upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer, And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.

-Maya Angelou

Remember last Thanksgiving? Where were you and who did you dine with? In my extended family, I remember how we debated for weeks about whether we should have the Thanksgiving meal in person and set up tables in the garage bundled up in blankets...or not at all. In the end, we decided it was too risky to eat with one another so we visited for an hour and sipped coffee furtively from our various corners of the open living room, leaving the turkey and fixings for my folks to enjoy by themselves. Paul and I went home and did the same. I know many people who also held ZoomGivings...holding each other close through cyberspace.

This year, thankfully, at our house we'll eat at a long table, potluck style. Everyone is vaccinated and ready to rate one another's creamy gravy and pour it liberally over hot sliced turkey, with Grammie's chestnut stuffing and Pete's sweet potato mash on the side.

Everyone at our house has a signature dish! And nothing better be missing or someone will hear about it. My brother, Dennis, has the best recipe for almond green beans you'd ever want to taste so check with him after church if you need one!! Don't get me started on dessert...

Before we eat though, we share what our indigenous ancestors called, "*the words that come before all else*". Grace, however it spills out of our mouth as we go around the table on Thanksgiving Day becomes an invocation of gratitude. We say aloud our deepest thanks to one another (and to God). Someone at the table always gets a little testy as we go around the circle (because the dinner is growing cold...) and it takes longer than anyone would like. Saying grace is a tradition we hold to like homemade apple pie.

In the Thanksgiving Address that our Sunday School children shared with us a few minutes ago, the Words That Come Before All Else are a compilation of gratitudes shared from the oral tradition of the Onondaga Nation (made up of 6 tribes from upstate New York, Wisconsin and Canada.)¹ The roots of these particular words reach back thousands of years to the very origins of the Haudenosaunee People. It, too, is a little long and reminds us of how **much** we have to be thankful for.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that this indigenous prayer reminds us all that we are a part of "the democracy of species" in the natural world community. It is a pledge of interdependence and opens us to consider the world all around us in a relational way. Kimmerer suggests that, after giving our thanks we should ask ourselves..., "In return for the gifts of the Earth, what will we give?"

The moral covenant of reciprocity with the earth and all its creatures calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken. As Kimmerer writes, "It's

¹ <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/british-north-america/haudenosaunee-thanksgiving-address/>

our turn now, long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making...Gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision, all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.”²

It is this grace which I hope will be considered as part of your Thanksgiving this year as it will be ours. With this spirit of thankfulness, we are invited to approach the season of Thanksgiving with humility, whatever tables we find ourselves gathering around.

Many of us are disheartened by the state of the world, the ugliness of prejudice and the politics of hate on full display each day in the news. Refocusing ourselves on the gifts of the earth and one another seems a life-saving way/mindset/perspective in which to reorient (and root) ourselves in the ordinary sacramentality of our lives.

The Table after all, is the heart of our faith, an inclusive place of communion, memory and gratitude where all are invited to feast. In our church since COVID, we haven't been able to share communion in the traditional way for quite some time...but I'm hoping this Thanksgiving will offer you an experience of communion in good company wherever you might be celebrating it.

Our scripture for today is known as the Parable of the Great Dinner, a timely story for our Thanksgiving planning and feasting. Table fellowship in Jesus' time and in his teachings was central. Kingdom ethics didn't seek out the powerful in the community but the powerless. Earlier in this chapter, there are stories which impart wisdom for the guests of a dinner (14:7-11) and for the hosts (v. 12-14).

And here, we read that someone is holding a dinner banquet and the regulars are unable to attend. The host asks his servant to go out into the streets of the city to invite all the ones who usually don't get an invitation to the table; the broken, the last, the least likely to succeed, the vulnerable, and the wounded. Those who are usually negated from any guest list. There's enough room and more than enough room for everyone who can come...the surprise of the gospel often is this holy twist in the reversal of fortunes: the insiders are out and the outsiders are in. Sound familiar?

In a few weeks we'll gather at the manager, another of God's tables, and hear how the mighty are brought down low and the weak raised up...(*Mary's Magnificat*). For everyone born, there's a place at the table. Hospitality here, literally means, loving the stranger whomever that might be.

To me, this gospel parable challenges us to think beyond who usually gets invited into the fold. It turns the tables on the ethics of hospitality.

This text recalled to me our Pilgrim Fellowship trip last month to the Breakfast Run in NYC with the youth of our church. We packed up those white plastic church tables into a few cars and set them up on a cracked sidewalk in Manhattan, hoping people would come to share in the breakfast and lunches we'd prepared. Sure enough, folks were already lined up when we arrived.

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, (2013), p. 115.

In the span of an hour and a half, we had the privilege of feeding whomever showed up...young and old, tired and worn, unhoused and invisible, it didn't matter. It didn't matter where folks were from, what job they had or didn't have, what language they spoke, what they believed or didn't believe, or whom they loved or didn't love. What mattered was that they'd come!

In reflections afterwards with some of the students on the trip, we tried to imagine if the tables were reversed and it had been us on that street corner waiting for someone to show up with hot coffee...how would we have felt? In the experiences at the simple table, we received far more than we'd brought, of course, and the faces we had now in our hearts, the conversations we entered into on that sunny, anonymous street left many of us changed.

That is the gospel vision of kinship and hospitality, grace at the table, that courses through every teaching, story and meal that Jesus ever presided over. Writes the author and UCC minister, Donna Schaper, "Glimpses of grace at table give us glimpses of justice. Those glimpses change the world—as well as the way we eat our meals. The starting place is the table—and having the horizon a table affords."³

In this season of giving thanks, we can appreciate all the tables we've sat at together as a church community, in small and large ways; including our church partnerships from the Tree of Life journeys to the WestBank, to Haiti, to Green Grass, South Dakota on the Cheyenne River Reservation and places in between, reminding us of the wider relationships we all belong to.

Those tables also inhabit the more mundane moments like sitting with one another at a Deacons' meetings in Fellowship Hall on a Tuesday night. And showing up on a Monday afternoon to create colorful handcrafts with the Ladies Who Stitch friends.

The prophetic urgency of the table also implores us to challenge the status quo, to fight for affordable housing, change food insecurity, call for reproductive rights and racial inequity, and stand up for the voiceless.

It invites us to share a mug of hot tea with our Afghan family at their new kitchen table. And learn some prayers from friends at the mosque a few towns away.

Grace at table is a sacrament,
a way to notice that the ordinary *is* holy.
In countless ways, the invitation to widen the table is ever present in the
Not Quite there Yet Kinship of God.

The table ethics of gratitude is where there's always room for more, room to recommit to the common good and faithful work to rebuild conditions that reflect the worth and dignity of all.

This Thanksgiving I hope your table is piled high with a mountain of green beans, moments of grace and flowing gratitude. Some seats at the table may be filled empty with fresh losses and the pain of absence more than anything else. And we are thankful for the presence of

³ Donna Schaper, *Grace at Table: Small Spiritual Solutions to Large Material Problems, Solving Everything* (2013).

those who can keep their courage and their hope going even in the midst of despair. And still, let's be mindful of others of us who may wish they didn't have to spend the holiday alone.

At the same time, some of our tables may be celebrating the birth of a new life with joy. And the surprising return of a long lost relative to the fold.

However, the day or season takes place at your house, may you know you are a part of a wide and bountiful table of belonging with many leaves and extensions that stretch as far as the eye and heart can see.

And as we prepare to gather around Thanksgiving traditions (and pie),
May we remember the words that come before all else,
The words that come before all worry and fear All separation and indulgence
All To Do Lists and never enoughness. The words that come before all else...
And may you know there will always be a place for you here.
Thank you
Thank you
Thank you!