

**“We Didn’t Know We Could Dream that Big:
A Thanksgiving Sermon”**

Forrest Church, that famed, faulty hero of a minister I never met
Who served our UU faith with such a big heart in NYC for three decades
Before he died too young several years ago from cancer,
Once said that Thanksgiving remains our most religious
Non-Christian holiday,
And this is because no one is excluded from the table –
Not the middle-class Muslim convert, not the atheist cousin,
not the evangelical Christian mother-in-law, not the secular Jewish brother,
not the skeptical spouse,
not the UU minister, not the haven’t been to church in years and could really
care less twenty-something, not the Romney voter,
not the Obama pollster -
none of them excluded,
all of us gathered from whatever and whomever we have been
divorced (as our first poem put it)
to sit at the table and practice this uniquely American Dream –
that we need not think alike to love alike,
That out the many, out of the E Pluribus, we are Unum, we are one.

At least that’s the idea, right?

At least until someone – maybe you – opens the discussion up to politics,

And all hell breaks loose.

Will you indulge me some preacherly advice?

– four words: speak gently; listen openly.

Forrest wrote that if we were to sit down at the table and open with a reading,
The sacred text could be The Mayflower Compact.

Remember that from 7th grade history class?

In it, these newly free people did something on their own

which no group in England had dared –

they determined (and I'm quoting now)

To *“covenant and combine ourselves together into one body,
For our better ordering and preservation.”*

Which, very simply, meant that they promised to look out for one another,

Stand by one another,

stay in relationship with one another despite their differences,

Because they were stronger and better together.

That these free people didn't extend this same covenant

To the Native people they met on the shores and in the woods,

That even today we can elect a black president but still live

In ways that keep most of us divorced along race lines and class lines,

Particularly here in the suburbs,

Shouldn't lessen the potential for the pilgrim's dream

To change us and challenge us.

Or as Oscar Romero put it:

“We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We lay foundations that will always need further development.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

The Mayflower Compact is like that; our covenant at church is like that;
and this holiday right around the corner – Thanksgiving –
Is like that, too,
As we strive, as Forrest said, to give thanks for *being*,
and give thanks for being *here*,
And give thanks for being here *together*.

But all this I have said is just the prelude.

The real sermon I want us to hear is happening on the second floor porch
Of a two story home in the neighborhood of Treme in New Orleans,
Treme that neighborhood we might recognize because after Katrina
It got its own show on HBO.
From the second floor porch of that home you can see to your left
An open lot filled with grass as tall as I am,
Grass that sways this way and that from the backdraft
Of trucks and cars passing by on the highway overpass that is nearly overhead.
There was once a home that filled this vacant lot,
But some years ago that home caught fire –
a bright orange, roaring fire with flames so high
that when the fire department came
And extinguished it with water there was nearly nothing left except embers,
And the house next door, the house I am now standing in,
Was soaked through from floor to ceiling, from ground to roof;
This before Katrina came and ripped the roof off and soaked it all again,
This before the contractors the family hired to fix it
ran off with their money...twice.

From the second floor, in through the windows we are putting bars on
So the squatters won't come back,
You can smell the sour remains of some animal that has crawled into
That vacant lot to die there in the tall grass,
hidden like so much else that is hidden from us in our inner cities.
The smell is so strong that even though I have been home a week
From our church rebuilding trip there to that magical, broken city
– my third, the church's twelfth –
I still cannot get the smell out of my nostrils and I cannot get
The taste cleansed from the back of my throat.

The day I am telling us about is Tuesday, Nov.6th
And while the rest of the country is voting the future of the country
I have a much more modest future in mind – I am trying,
With George Clattenburg – to measure boards for the base trim
Around the walls.
What is $3/8$ plus $5/16$? Asks George.
Um George, you know I went to seminary right?
I'm really bad at math.
Tell you what, I say to George, you measure and cut, I'll carry.
That I can do."

From upstairs I can hear the buzz of saws and the slap of paint
And the metal on metal tap of hammer on nails,
And just then I hear the voice of a young woman whose accent is different
Than ours drifting over all the work –

Do you know how if you can listen closely enough you can
Actually hear someone smiling?

That's how it was with this woman's voice, even though I couldn't
Hear what she was saying.

Feet up the stairs, the steep uneven turning stairs, clomp, clomp, clomp...

"And here is the bathroom," says the voice of Terry Combs,

Our project leader.

'We're getting there.'

More loud smiles.

What is $3/4$ plus $2/3$? mutters George.

A bigger number I reply.

And then I carry in the next piece we need to cut from the pile

Of used pieces, re-opening as I do so the cut on my finger

I got the previous week when I was starting some work on my own kitchen.

The blood flowing from my finger like it did back home,

the sting stinging like it did back home, somehow enhances even more the contrast

Between my house and this house, between my life and the life

That embodies this woman's voice I will soon meet.

Back home Karen and I are dreaming kitchen dreams of new windows,

New paint, who knows, maybe even new appliances to match that gleaming

New steal chrome refrigerator we bought last summer.

But there in that house me and the entire crew.

many of whom sit in the pews with you now,

Need to nurture smaller dreams – like can we get those broken windows on the left
side

Boarded up? And can we secure all the doors?
And can we put at least one coat of paint on the floors?
And can we re-attach the railings on the front porch?
And can we re-attach the fire escape to the back deck so it doesn't dangerously
bounce when you descend?

This work, this hard, and can I say basic work that feels like countries and
countries

Away from my comfortable home in comfortable Holliston, Massachusetts
Reminds me again of Oscar Romero's words,
How this is what we are supposed to be about,
Planting seeds that will one day grow,
Watering seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We are workers, not master builders, he says,
Ministers, not messiahs.

And as a minister standing there holding tight my bleeding finger,
As your minister who is confronted again and again with my limits
And yours – *could I have done more to save that couple's marriage?*
Was I too gentle with that person who needs some tough love?
Could I have helped us be just a little bit more uncomfortable in these
surroundings
That speak to us of so much comfort? –
I know what Oscar was speaking of.

And yet, standing there in that barren room with Thanksgiving so close
And the Pilgrim Spirit in the air and the Mayflower Compact

Ring in my ears can I confess to how troubled I am, how ill-at-ease,
How uncomfortable,
Because if covenant means we are bound up together,
And I am and you are bound up with this woman,
Then as long as one of us is homeless,
then all of us are a little homeless,
And as long as one of us is rebuilding, then all of us are rebuilding,
And, more hopefully, as long as one of us returns home,
walking from room to room, smiling loudly,
Then maybe we all can feel a little less exiled, just a little,
From the people we say we want to be.

Back to the house –

While the woman I have still yet to meet is peering into the newly
Tiled bathroom floor,
I hop down the stairs to find a band-aid for that finger of mine
That is still bleeding.

Nathan, says George, what is half of 60 and 2/3?

Just round it off and cut it, I say, that's why they invented calking!

Finger wrapped, blood cleaned up,

I make my back up those uneven, spiraled stairs

And follow the voice of Terry and the woman out to the front porch
That now has railings, and through the window I see that she has one
Arm draped over it, fingering it the way we do to something
that was lost and has been found,
that was treasured and has now been returned.

The giant live oaks that have withstood all manner of wind and rain
And fire and storms, dipping with Spanish moss,
Hover our Terry and this woman, I learn later her name is Wendi,
And from the window I hear Terry asking her about colors she would like
For the floors, and what kind of vanity she thinks her parents would like
In the bathroom (because she shares this home with them).
Such simple questions really, such modest questions.
Back home I'm dreaming big dreams of lovely new Pella windows
and chrome appliances and maybe even a new counter top
and not thinking much of it, never at a loss for words about my plans.

But as Terry talks Wendi is at a loss for words.
Terry is talking and Wendy is not saying much at all. Silence.
Noise of trucks and cars on the highway nearly next store.
The breeze lifts and carries again that sour smell from the field next door.
And then do you know what Wendi says?
I didn't hear, but Terry told us all later.
Wendi says out of the silence.

*"Sorry, Terry, sorry. Just give me a minute,
Because ...you know...*

We just didn't know we could dream this big.

Paint on floors – we just didn't know we could dream this big.

Sink in bathroom - We just didn't know we could dream this big.

Tile in kitchen - We just didn't know we could dream this big.

Bars on windows - We just didn't know we could dream this big.

And the point here, of course, is not make us feel guilty about our dreams,

or have us feel sorry for Wendi.

The point is for us to learn from Wendi's experience,
Because as Pilgrim people who are in covenant together
we are bound up in Wendy's dreams,
And her dreams are bound up in ours.

Later that night at dinner when Terry told us what Wendi had said
I pleaded with the group –

Don't tell the congregation about it! I want to use for the sermon!

Don't steal my thunder!

Because the truth is when I heard Wendi's words I didn't just think
Of Wendi.

I also thought of us and how we get redeemed....

How after one of you is laid off for years you come up to me in the receiving
Line after a job is found – *I didn't know I could dream.*

How after a long season of loss or depression something suddenly seems
To lift – *I didn't know I could dream.*

How after being divorced from love or loved ones a hand reaches
Out across the table - *I didn't know I could dream.*

How after going through the motions and wondering what difference
You make you help change a woman's life by asking her

What color she wants her bathroom to be - *I didn't know I could dream.*

Thanksgiving is a time to give thanks not just for what is,

But also for what is still possible.

So for all that our dreams for these possibilities, can I get an *amen*...

For Wendi and her teaching us how to give thanks for the dreams

We didn't know we could have, can I get an *amen*...

And for the covenants that keep us honest, that teach us

That my joy is bound up in your joy,

and my pain is bound up in your pain,

and my dreams are wrapped up in your dreams, can I get an *Amen*.

Amen. Let us sing....

First Reading

Our first reading is for all of you reuniting with family later this coming week and all the love and complication and joy and stress and hope
And pain that brings.

It is by Jeredith Merrin and this poem is called “Family Reunion”

Alex Businger will read for us:

Family Reunion

The divorced mother and her divorcing
daughter. The about-to-be ex-son-in-law
and the ex-husband's adopted son.
The divorcing daughter's child, who is

the step-nephew of the ex-husband's
adopted son. Everyone cordial:
the ex-husband's second wife
friendly to the first wife, warm

to the divorcing daughter's child's
great-grandmother, who was herself
long ago divorced. Everyone
grown used to the idea of divorce

Almost everyone has separated
from the landscape of childhood.
Collections of people in cities
are divorced from clean air and stars.

Toddlers in day care are parted
from working parents, schoolchildren
from the assumption of unbloodied
daylong safety. Old people die apart

from all they've gathered over time,
and in strange beds. Adults
grow estranged from a God
evidently divorced from history;

most are cut off from their own
histories, each of which waits
like a child left at day care.
What if you turned back for a moment

and put your arms around yours?
Yes, you might be late for work;
no, your history doesn't smell sweet
like a toddler's head. But look

at those small round wrists,
that short-legged, comical walk.
Caress your history—who else will?
Promise to come back later.

Pay attention when it asks you
simple questions: Where are we going?
Is it scary? What happened? Can
I have more now? Who is that?

Second Reading:

Our second reading comes from Archbishop and true Saint Oscar Romero –
Ever heard of him? – who was assassinated in 1980 in El Salvador,
Primarily for his work as a priest devoted to the liberation of the poor.
This reading is one that we used at our church staff retreat back in August,
And that I have wanted to share with us ever since.
Howard Teibel will read it for us:

*This is what we are about:
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders,
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

