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Thanksgiving: An Outsider's Holiday
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My friends, I wonder, how was your Thanksgiving?

I think it was a hard Thanksgiving for a lot of people. Sure, there's the business with the election, but what about just general Thanksgiving toughness. But everyone always fights at Thanksgiving, right? It's an American tradition. Like Football, Black Friday, and Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the good old Thanksgiving family showdown, right?

Or worse, the awkward, New England, we've got a lot of issues, but we are just going to pretend we don't, and sit and be polite while we discuss the table setting, or sportsball, or whatever, but definitely not politics.

You see, I've been to both kinds of Thanksgivings, and everything in between. Since moving the US, the only one that celebrates this holiday of Thanksgiving on the third Thursday (of all days in the week) in November, I have had the pleasure of spending 11 glorious, beautiful, and awkward Thanksgivings as the outsider in someone else's family. And every year, every single year, at least half a dozen people remember that I'm Canadian and invite me to join their family, however they choose to define it, for Thanksgiving. Because nothing brings out really good American hospitality like Thanksgiving.

And you know what? Being an outsider at Thanksgiving, can be kind of awesome. For one thing I never have to host and I'm never expected to cook. And if I'm sitting in someone's stuffy New England we-don't-talk-about-our-issues Thanksgiving dinner, I'm usually totally oblivious to what's going on below the surface and am munching away on my Turkey and mashed potatoes.

But it can also be kind of strange and surreal. I'm sure you've all been around a family or group of friends when they start going down memory lane and totally lost you, and then they try to catch you up, but it's full of "you really had to be there" moments.

And then, of course, there are these strange American rituals you have. Let me first tell you that Canadian Thanksgiving is, like, not a thing. It's on a Sunday and you get the Monday off, you have some turkey, and it's over. Awesome.

Not so with American Thanksgiving. Apparently there's always a Football game on. Which, I don't know, it seems kind of cold for, and everyone's upset about retail workers working on Thanksgiving, but I keep thinking what about the Football players? Which is probably missing the point. But this is, like, a serious tradition for some families. And just last Thanksgiving, actually, I was at a professor's house from my seminary, and they actually went outside and played football themselves. Which I had seen in a lot of movies about Thanksgiving, but felt like I had stumbled onto some kind of scene perfect Americana, whatever.

And then there's the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, which I have also watched on TV. With different families. And I swear I watched a Puppy Bowl one Thanksgiving and literally until I was doing the research for my sermon, I thought that was some kind of Thanksgiving tradition. I don't know.

And on top of all that, it can also be hard. No matter how welcoming a family is, you can always feel it. That you don't quite fit. That you don't quite belong.

And anybody who's ever been an outsider at Thanksgiving knows that feeling.

Whether you are an outsider because you literally come from "outside" like I do, outside of the country or outside of the family, or whether you are an outsider in some other way.

Because, we've all been outsiders, haven't we? I don't stand alone in this. This is not an experience that is unique to me.

There are many kinds of outsiders on Thanksgiving.

There's the partner going home with a new boyfriend or girlfriend (or even a long term significant other) and have been the outsider, trying to prove themselves.

There's the teenager, trying to decide if she's going to come out to her family for the first time.

There's the person who's been diagnosed with a serious illness who hasn't told their family yet.

There's the man, coming to thanksgiving alone for the first time after the end of a long term relationship.

There's the woman, who, after years of coming to Thanksgiving alone, is constantly nagged by her relatives as to why she hasn't brought someone home yet.

The person suffering silently from domestic violence that no else in the family can even tell is happening. Or worse, knows, but won't say anything.

There's the Clinton supporter in a family full of Trump supporters. The Trump supporter in a family full of Clinton supporters.

There are those who spend Thanksgiving alone by choice. And those who spend Thanksgiving alone because they have nowhere to spend it.

And sometimes the outsider is the person hosting thanksgiving. The one making all the food, tending to everyone's needs, and not having a moment to enjoy the holiday herself. The one who maybe never hears a word of thanks on Thanksgiving of all days.

The beauty of humanity is that we strive for connection, and yet in that connection our wonderful, complicated, individuality against each other in messy ways, yet we still crave connection. We can feel whole and welcomed and the outsider and unwelcome in the same group at different times. Maybe even at the same time.

And yes, we can feel, or be made to feel, like outsiders in our own homes.

So the story of Thanksgiving, the first Thanksgiving as Americans refer to it that we just heard about in the Time for All Ages, and what really must have been going through some of the

Native American's minds, what really must have been going through to offer such hospitality to the Europeans. Talk about being made to feel like an outsider in your own home.

The Native Americans lived in relative peace with the European settlers for roughly 10 years after that first "Thanksgiving" until many more Europeans came to North America and war broke out over land. Many Native Americans celebrate the holiday in a different way than those of us who are descendants from those of other lands.

Jaqueline Keeler, a member of Dineh Nation and Yankton Dakota Sioux says "Thanksgiving tells a story that is convenient for Americans, but it's a celebration of our survival. I recognize it as a chance for my family to come together as survivors, pretty much in defiance."

Survival, in the face of insurmountable odds.

Friends, are you familiar with the Dakota Access Pipeline?

[What the Pipeline is]

And the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and their allies have been standing up as protectors of their water, in protest of this pipeline and in support of their land.

And last Sunday the police attacked these peaceful protesters. With tear gas. With water cannons spraying the protectors with freezing cold water on a 27 degree night. With guns. And with grenades.

So I just want to be really clear about what happened. A Native American were attacked for protecting their land by Americans, treated like outsiders in the country that they lay more claim to than most of us here, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The holiday where we celebrate Native American hospitality. The holiday that represents hospitality.

And, man, I know it's been a hard month. And I know we want to come to church to get away from the pain of the world. The pain the world is revealing. This is what I want. But I can't stop thinking about this. My heart is so heavy with how these people are being treated for trying to protect their land.

And I'm not telling you this because I want to make you feel guilty, or because I'm trying to convince you of some political agenda, or whatever. But because these things are hard to talk about. And, just like at the Thanksgiving table, sometimes we avoid the things that are hard to talk about. And before Thanksgiving I made a pledge to start talking about the things that are hard to talk about, and so here I am. Because we need to talk about how this country is treating people like outsiders. The immigrants, and the Native Americans alike. And no, not the immigrants who look like me. Because, don't forget, I'm an immigrant, too. But the ones who are black and brown. And I'm saying this to you because I think you can hear it.

So, part of the reason that I'm say all this to you, is because it's important. And I think we all need to be talking about these things more. And I feel a little bit scared to talk about this with you. Because there is part of me that thinks, "I'm just the intern, Nathan and Heather can deal with these big issues." Because I think "I'm not there, I don't REALLY know what's happening."

Because I think I'm going to say something wrong. Because what good is giving a sermon about this injustice to you all. What difference does it make?

But that's the way difficult conversations go, right? I'm thinking about all those of you who had difficult conversations about politics, or perhaps more accurately, had difficult conversations about racism, sexism, ableism, perhaps you had these conversations over Thanksgiving. And maybe it was hard. And maybe, instead of saying something, you just stayed silent when you know you should have spoken up; when you know you should have said something.

And I think we all feel like that sometimes. We can all find the things that we so desperately disagree with that we want to say something, but we are around people who disagree. And one of the hardest places for this can be our family. Because nothing makes you feel more like an outsider than being the one person who is explaining why you don't think a certain joke is funny, or why it's not ok that people are getting letters like the one the man go in Natick asking black people to leave. Because sometimes being the one who says what you believe is alienating. Sometimes it makes you feel like an outsider. And sometimes we make ourselves feel like outsiders before even trying to bridge that gap, before even trying to enter into conversation.

But here's my challenge to you, and trust me, it's my challenge to me, too. Have those hard conversations. I bet you have friends who have seen this church and its Black Lives Matter Banner and are wondering what that's about. Take a chance and have a conversation about it with them. Ask them what they think. Talk to your friends and family about Thanksgiving and its origins and the ways in which some Native Americans experience the holiday today, and how that all ties in with what's happening in Standing Rock.

AND... And this is so important. And you need to realize that there will be little or no concrete differences from these conversations. Especially not immediately. But little by little we become more aware of what is happening in this world and we become more energized to do something about it. And but you can't stop and fall into despair when one of the most important things you can be doing is to talk about the hard stuff.

The holidays are not over with Thanksgiving. Many of us will be seeing family and friends over the coming month. I really encourage you to lean into the uncomfortable. To be curious. To be vulnerable with what you believe and open to what you don't know. We are all in this together and it may seem overwhelming, but conversations and people and common understand is something many of us are striving for.

It's a daunting task and I promise that you will fail. And you have to be gentle with yourself when you do. But don't let the fact that you might fail stop you from trying. Because we Unitarian Universalists are a justice seeking, love-filled people. One of our greatest blessings is that our values call us to live into ambiguity and discomfort in the service or greater justice.

I have been so inspired by the conversations that have been happening in this church. The depth to which we are all struggling together through all of these issues is truly humbling. Let us continue to holy work for struggling. The holy work of being vulnerable. The holy work of difficult conversations.

Let us say together Amen.

Amen.