

## THANKSGIVING CONVERSATIONS IN A TIME OF WAR

A sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
Memorial Church, Stanford University  
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Imagine yourself around that Thanksgiving table. It's only a few days away. A tablecloth and china and decorations. The smell of turkey and stuffing and gravy ... cranberries and sweet potatoes. Pumpkin pie for dessert. Lots of family, and maybe some special friends too. Laughter and loud voices. And always, lots and lots of wonderful conversation.

That's the ideal picture, anyway. It won't be true for all of us here, nor for many, many people across the country. Yet, Thanksgiving is a truly national holiday with more commonalities than perhaps any other, even for elderly in a nursing home and for the hundreds of students who will be eating a special dinner together on campus at Tresidder Union next Thursday. There's a shared story of the first Thanksgiving behind it all: In the fall of 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, Governor William Bradford invited native American neighbors to a three day feast in gratitude for the successful fall harvest. Bradford made it crystal clear that without the help of the local Wampanoag Indians, the pilgrims would never have made it to the first Thanksgiving. The Indians generously shared food with the English settlers during the first winter and then showed them how to plant and cultivate corn the next spring and summer!<sup>1</sup> Luckily the first harvest was a generous one, as Governor Bradford put it, "safely gathered in ere the winter storms begin."<sup>2</sup> A three day feast was planned in late November, and the pilgrims invited the Indian chief Massasoit and his people. Ninety Wampanoags arrived with five deer to eat, supplementing the wild turkeys the English had shot.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what was to follow, as Europeans were to deprive native peoples of their land and their lives, the Thanksgiving story is one of reaching out across race and ethnicity and religion and nationality and language in order to sit at a common table together in peace. Those who were to be oppressed reached out and saved the lives and the livelihoods of their future oppressors. That day they joined together in peace and harmony. That day they shared together and celebrated together. Thanksgiving remains imaged for many of us as a time of gratitude, a time of plenty, a time for friends and family, a quiet and prayerful time, a time of peace.

Yet, this year our country is at war. Indelibly imprinted on our minds forever is the image of the twin towers of the world trade center imploding on September 11, and the knowledge that more than 5,000 people inside were incinerated and crushed as others fell to their death from dizzying heights. Each of those people's families and friends will miss them desperately this Thanksgiving. We remember as well the death and destruction at the Pentagon and in the hillsides of Pennsylvania. Since October 7 our troops have been fighting in Afghanistan, trying to root out and destroy the Al-Qaida network which it's believed is behind those terrorist attacks. Many of our troops won't be back for Thanksgiving. On the home front we've been through an emotional ringer,

whether or not we lost people close to us. Our feelings have ranged from outrage to grief, from fear to depression.

So what will our Thanksgiving conversations be like this year in a time of war? What will students away from home for the first time say when they see their parents and brothers and sisters again -- when they can finally communicate face to face, rather than by e-mail and telephone? What will it be like to see old high school classmates and hometown friends? How will parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, respond to their children and grandchildren, their nieces and nephews? Hopefully there will be strangers around many of our Thanksgiving tables too, or acquaintances who are stranded physically or by life circumstances over this holiday, away from those they know well. What kind of Thanksgiving conversations will we have with others at our table in a time of war?

Today's gospel lesson from Luke<sup>4</sup> begins "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he [Jesus] said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" His words presage the Romans' destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, in the year 70.<sup>5</sup> Jesus goes on to explain that "Nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," and that his followers will be arrested and persecuted. Perhaps most chilling in this passage is Jesus' prediction that "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death." War is not only hell for combatants and those in the line of fire, but war can tear homefront families apart internally. It can end friendships forever as disagreements and dissension become overwhelming.

I'll never forget the wrenching arguments and hostility that developed among my friends and family during the Vietnam war. I specifically remember taunts and threats being yelled back and forth across my residential college courtyard at Yale in the 1960's, with George W. Bush and his friends on one side and myself and my roommates on the other. I'll also not forget George W. Bush's courage in breaking away from his group one evening, walking across the courtyard, sitting down with us, and genuinely asking us to explain why we were against the war, so that he could really understand. I still have a vivid picture, too, of the Thanksgiving when I explained to my parents that I was a conscientious objector to war and could never go over and kill fellow human beings in Vietnam. My mother's response burned a hole in my soul. With anger flashing in her eyes, and without any further discussion, she exploded: "I'd rather have you be dead than be a coward." Only decades later, when she apologized for those words, did the Vietnam war really end for me and my soul begin to heal.

So, the first piece of advice I'm going to give you in this sermon is this: Be gentle with your relatives and friends, and with yourselves, in your conversations over that Thanksgiving meal. Feel free to explain how you feel and what you're thinking, but only after you've helped others to see that you really understand what they're feeling and thinking. If you're an American citizen, remember that your own patriotism is not the only form. Find out the specific ways that your parent or your child, your cousin or your friend, loves this country and what it stands for. The strength of a family, a friendship, and this nation itself lies in mutual respect, in civil dialogue, and ultimately in love. At the end of the reading from Malachi,<sup>6</sup> the prophet Elijah appears as a peacemaker, relating conciliation within families to that within a nation as a whole: "He [Elijah] will

turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse."

Therefore, my most important piece of advice is not to miss any opportunity to tell each family member, each relative, and each friend how much you love him or her this Thanksgiving. I also suggest following your breath, not just in your meditational and prayer life, but every time you're tempted to say something in anger to another person. Fall silent, instead, and take three big breaths through your nose, preferably with your eyes closed, before you open your mouth again.

I also suggest doing active, fun things together with your family and friends, and that doesn't mean just watching sports in front of a TV screen. The Kennedy clan always used to play touch football when they got together. In your clan, at least get outside and throw a Frisbee around.

When you need time alone, this may be the holiday time, even more than Christmas, to listen carefully to great music. If it's recorded, put on a pair of earphones, or turn up the volume behind closed doors, so that you can completely lose yourself in its melodies and harmonies. If you have to sit in front of screens, go the movies with families and friends and see a good comedy. Laugh together, and let your tears be ones of joy.

Finally, though, get outside of yourself and care for someone else who really needs it. Visit a shut-in, work in a homeless shelter or food kitchen, join with the local Muslim community in fasting, almsgiving, and celebration of Ramadan. No matter what you do, though, in the words of the hymn<sup>7</sup> we sang before the gospel lesson, may this Thanksgiving be a time when each of us simply experiences and expresses love: "Immortal love, forever full, forever flowing free, forever shared, forever whole, a never ebbing sea." Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> George Willson, The Pilgrim Reader (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1953), p. 152

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Scott W. Alexander in "A Thanksgiving Sermon," published in the Church of the Larger Fellowship newsletter (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, November, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Willson, Pilgrim Reader, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 21: 5-19.

<sup>5</sup> Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion (Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 1061.

<sup>6</sup> Malachi 3: 13 – 4: 2a, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, "Immortal Love" (1866).