

## "THANKSGIVING & THE FISHER KING"

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.  
on November 26, 2006  
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

I hope that you all had happy days of thanksgiving, and that you found much for which to be thankful -- that whatever satisfies your heart and mind, it has been yours. May it still be so.

Each of us has his or her own sense of what most satisfies, for which we can aspire, the achievement of which will be our greatest blessing. I remember a cartoon I saw some years ago. It had no caption. It pictured a pot at the end of a rainbow, and beside the pot, a very happy rabbit, and in the pot an abundance of carrots - not gold, as humans have dreamt, but carrots.

I tell you, if I ever find the pot at the end of the rainbow, I will be pretty let down if it turns out to be full of carrots. But I am not a rabbit.

Even among humans, there are many different visions of what it means to be blessed. The accomplishment that makes one person feel complete and glad, another person could not care less about. Or a person imagines that some possession will make life happy and full, while another person, possessing it, feels in it no pleasure or reward.

The Thanksgiving season is a good time to ask, not just, how are we blessed, but are those the ways that matter to us most? I know, life means compromise, and happiness means in part learning to cherish the things that are ours, whatever they are, the simple joys of the everyday. Happiness comes in part from our appreciation of a grace in life that rewards us with goodness and beauty we do not aim for nor earn.

But happiness means, too, the feeling one can get from certain successes, ones that provide a sense that one's life has some effect, direction, purpose, meaning - that one's life matters in some way that one can believe is important and real. Being blessed is a matter of accomplishment as well as of gift.

My former colleague, Al Perry, once wrote a thanksgiving piece that speaks of that side of our blessedness, the gifts that come to us because of our effort and wisdom, or that don't for lack thereof:

"Many years ago, when our children were young," he writes, "we lived by the shore of a large Canadian lake that had endless schools of small bony fish which constantly stole our bait and got themselves hooked when we were fishing for bass and pike.

"Since we never knew what to do with these, and hated to throw them back where there were too many already, we thought one spring to imitate the Pilgrims and put them in the hills where we were planting corn.

"For each hill we took three fish and five kernels of corn - with the heads facing in and the seeds near the eyes - and we covered it all over and felt very proud of ourselves and dreamed of the Thanksgiving we would celebrate some months down the road.

"But the next morning our dreams were shattered. Skunks or dogs or who-knows-what had held a banquet in our cornfield, dug up all the fish and scattered the seed, and generally made a mess of things. From that moment on, I fear, a spark of skepticism was born in the minds of those youthful mimics of history."

"Actually, the problem was that we had forgotten one part of Squanto's instructions. He also advised the Pilgrims to maintain a watch for 14 days and nights to keep away the wolves until the fish had rotted. Even in those mystic times there was no promise of bounty from God without labor."

So I hope you had "a good Thanksgiving! It will mean <in part> that you ... earned it."

But the question remains, earned what? Yes, we are benefited by grace and effort both, and between them given chances to succeed and the sometime success, but at tasks which matter to us, toward ends that will make us grateful when achieved?

The contrast is expressed in C. P. Cavafy's poem, "Satrapy" [meaning a Persian province, or its ruler]:

... How frightful the day when you yield ...  
and you go to the monarch Artaxerxes  
who graciously gives you a place in his court,  
and offers you satrapies and such.  
And you accept with despair  
these things you do not want.  
Your soul seeks other things, weeps for other things;  
... the hard-won, invaluable Well Done;  
the Agora, the Theater, and the Laurels.  
How can Artaxerxes give you these?  
Where will you find these in a satrapy?  
And without these, what life can you live?

What are the things our souls seek, even weep for, and are we searching where they can be found? What is it we hope for, each of us, what private victories in life will give us grounds for our most heartfelt thanks? And are we engaged in those struggles, or not? Upon what quests have we set our steps, toward what imagined destinies: toward lives we can live, and with satisfaction and joy?

In the western world, the goal of human questing is often symbolized by the so-called Holy Grail, these days understood to be a chalice or goblet from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper. In fact, the Holy Grail as a religious symbol predates Christianity, and was only appropriated as a Christian symbol in the late 12th century, borrowed from the religious rituals and folk tales of northern Europe and the middle east alike, especially from the seasonal rites of middle eastern vegetation cults, and from Celtic legends that also focused on themes of death, rebirth and renewal and featured a restorative platter or cauldron.

These ideas were taken up by the writers of Grail romances, beginning with Chretien de Troyes in 1188, who tells of Perceval and the Fisher King, an account to which I will shortly return. Over the next century, such works abounded, with greater

emphasis on Jesus and on the legendary world of King Arthur.

Robert de Boron first connected The Grail with Jesus' goblet at the last supper, alleged to have been used thereafter by Joseph of Aramathea to collect Jesus' blood from the cross, then transported to England by Joseph's brother-in-law, the Fisher King, uncle of Galahad, grand-father of Perceval. Fancifully enough, this puts Camelot in the first century.

Other writers had Joseph himself bringing the Grail to England, or Mary Magdelene bringing it to France. Most famous of the Grail romances was Parzival by a Bavarian knight, Wolfram von Eschenbach, a work that Joseph Campbell described as "the high story of the middle ages."

But the glory days of chivalry faded, and after Islamic forces reestablished control of the Holy Land and the Knights Templar were dissolved in the early years of the 14th century, all these tales went little told until revived by Mallory in 1470 in his *Death of King Arthur*.

And revived the romance of the Grail has been ever since, as in the 1980s in the hugely successful Indiana Jones movies, where the Grail is a magical source of great power, eagerly sought by Nazi agents for their evil purposes as well as by our hero, played by Harrison Ford.

Strange to say, these tales have some foundation in fact. Not there is any reason to think that there ever was a cup that Jesus drank from that survived -- after all, there is not a shred of a rumor of anyone's imagining the existence of such an artifact for the first eleven relic-ridden centuries after Jesus' death. But it is true that Hitler was preoccupied with the Grail, what with its medieval Bavarian, pagan, and Wagnerian associations, and apparently he did dispatch a crew of agents to southern France to seek it.

My own curiosity about the Grail was aroused in 1991 by the movie, "The Fisher King," which puts forward a new rendition of the old legend in the course of telling a modern story about two men badly in need of healing from deep psychological wounds of their own. One of them, before he went mad from the horror and grief of a personal tragedy, was an academic scholar of the Fisher King myth, and the story is explicitly introduced by him, though in a new form.

Now, all the previous forms themselves were at variance with one another. The plot, the characters, the basic lines, all of the story changed every time it was recounted in one of the numerous variants that were produced in the century or so following Chretien de Troyes' epic poem. So it is difficult to say just what the legend really and truly is.

This difficulty has not stopped one modern writer after another from stating one rendition as if it were the basic or even the only one, mostly recently Dan Brown in his huge best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*, in which the Grail is the eternally feminine. I will offer a quick rendition of the traditional story myself, but I acknowledge that other choices can be made about nearly every detail.

As usual a version of the story as any might say that the Fisher King, while a youth in training to be a king, receives a wound in battle that incapacitates his

reproductiveness. As a result of his wound, his kingdom suffers from drought and blight.

Meanwhile, he is not able to do much more than fish. (Other suggestions about the derivation of his name tell of an event in which the young king caught and fed his company of grail-keepers ample fish, or point to the fish as a universal symbol of divine power. No one knows for sure, or claims to.)

The Fisher King lives in the Grail Castle, where the grail is kept. One day, young Perceval comes to the castle. As sad as the occupants usually are, they are delighted to see him, because he is expected to break the hold of the famine. But to do so, he has to ask the right question. In some versions, that question is, what is the meaning of the grail? But usually the question is, Whom does the grail serve?

These are both startlingly important questions that need to be raised of anything that we would take as a goal. As has been written (Mike Young), "Of every ideology that offers answers and solutions; of every cause that appeals for your support; of every would-be savior, quest or object of desire; ask 'Whom does it serve?'"

But Perceval forgets, or more often, fails to raise a question out of politeness, since his teacher had told him not to raise too many questions. Overly cautious, he does the one thing that dooms the kingdom to further woe. In variant versions, he actually initiates the drought by his failure, and becomes himself wounded.

In every account, the next morning, Perceval, a failure, is dismissed from the Grail Castle, which then disappears, leaving him to wander until he finds it again. In some versions, he eventually does, and asks the right question, and the Fisher King and he are both healed, and the former made young. In other versions, he is left forever a wounded wanderer, while Gawain arrives and asks the right question to accomplish the healing of the Fisher King and his kingdom.

(As a sidelight I might note that the key to solving the problem and causing healing to happen, is not any answer at all but somebody's asking the right question.)

Now when the story is told in the movie, it is changed yet again and simplified. In the movie's version, the Fisher King's wound is a hand he burned as a king in training by overconfidently reaching into a fire. As a consequence, the Grail is lost. Some medieval versions also blame the King for the loss of the Grail, because of his impure act of ogling an attractive woman.

In any case, the Fisher King languishes thereafter, until one day a visitor arrives. The visitor, seeing the King looking poorly, asks, "What ails you, friend?" The King says he's thirsty. The visitor goes to get him water, finds a cup that turns out to be the Grail, and brings the King a drink. The recovery of the Grail heals the King's wounds. The visitor is asked in wonder how he knew how to find the Grail when no one else could. And the visitor replies, "I didn't know. I only knew that he was thirsty."

What a fabulous redefinition of the visitor's assignment -- not that he get some question right, as important as that can be sometimes, but that he respond with compassion. One of the many 13th-century versions comes close to making the same point. Perceval is supposed to ask a question, but it is a personal one to the King: "Are you ill?"

And that, indeed, is often what saves us from the wounds that we carry: the caring of others. And that is what happens in the movie, in a complicated interchange between two wounded souls, each of whom is healed by the caring of the other -- and by the caring he himself extends.

Of the two sides to this mutual healing, the more obvious parallel with the Fisher King myth does involve a grail, a grail that the crazed ex-professor believes is in the mansion of a wealthy Manhattanite. A despairing, embittered, alcoholic ex-big-shot-radio-personality steals it for him. And, indeed, because the professor believes in it, the grail does prove to have magic, healing powers for him.

It is a crucial insight, heightened in the film by the fact that the grail, known to the professor only through a photograph, turns out to be a cheap schoolboy trophy, and its owner, the person who has had this envied possession on his shelves for decades, is found at the robbery to have that evening attempted suicide.

The power of our grails is not determined by monetary value. We are the makers of meaning and value. It may be but a schoolboy's trophy, but as an act of love and compassion on the part of the person who obtains and gives it, and as a symbol of rebirth for the recipient, who has defined its meaning, it is priceless.

We define our own grails, insofar as we can learn to know and to seek those achievements, possessions, and successes as will make a difference, be convincing, calm us on the long nights when the winds of our approaching oblivion sound loudly, bring healing to our deepest wounds, link us in compassion with the wounded walking with us, and cause us to smile (fools though we have often been) that at least in the things that mattered most to our own senses of right and of wrong, of love and of mercy, of self and of society, we have done about as well as could have been hoped, and have good cause to be satisfied, and glad, and thankful.

What are the grails after which we each quest? What do we seek of ourselves, of our lives, for ourselves, for our loved ones, for the world? Can we dare to ask the questions, to break inhibiting patterns and convention, to imagine goals more bold and noble and enticing?

A year from now, ten years from now, for what will each of us most profoundly offer thanks? For what are we longing? Will achieving it leave us glad? And deeply?

Toward grails or trophies or carrots, in what direction does our satisfaction lie? And are we heading toward it?