"A Common Table"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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"No matter what, we must eat to live." These words from the poem, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," by Joy Harjo underscore the importance of food in our lives. Of all the things we may or may not be as human persons, we are bodies. We are organisms in need of fuel. We are people who *must* eat to live.

While food is a necessity for life, food is so much more as well. Food and food rules play a large role in many religions. From the Christian ritual of communion...to Hindu offerings of food to deities...to dietary rules of eating Kosher or Halal, food often plays an important role in religion. Yet, as Unitarian Universalists, we have no food rules that we require our members to follow. Nor do we have a ritual around food that we regularly practice in worship. Although like many other religious groups, we *do* have a weekly time to share food and drink during Coffee Hour. Some have even suggested that for UU's coffee hour *is* our sacrament!

Why does *food* play such a central role in many religious systems?

I think the answer lies in Harjo's words: "No matter what, we must eat to live." When we talk about food, we are talking about the essentials of life. We are talking about how to stay alive, how to help life to flourish. And, at its core, I think religions are systems of beliefs and practices that seek to help us live full and meaningful lives. To live well. To live rightly.

This necessity for food helps to explain why food and eating become central to religion as well as to culture. For example, how we use food in our social relations with others can convey our intentions towards the other. Giving good food to another is, in effect, a wish for the recipient's life to flourish. It's saying, "*Hey, I'm glad you're alive and I hope you stay that way*!" So also, the refusal to feed another or even indifference to the hunger of another communicates disdain for the value of their life. "*Hey, I don't really care whether your life thrives or perishes, whether you live or die*."

Yet, this indifference is condemned by religious traditions. As the director of the World Food Programme, Ertharin Cousin, told a multireligious, multinational gathering last year: "Hunger has no religion; hunger has no culture; hunger has no nationality. Yet every religion, every faith, requires that we feed the hungry." Hunger has no religion. Food is basic human need. Feeding the hungry is basic human compassion.

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This common need for food creates a common ground, which bridges many differences that divides us. And yet, *what* we eat for food reflects tremendous diversity and difference. Cuisine is often linked to culture—we eat "Italian" or "French" or "Chinese" food. More than mere sustenance, food can become a cultural marker that helps to define identity.

Indeed, pumpkin pie helped to spark a 19th-century culture war in the US. According to an essay by Ariel Knoebel, in the 19th-century pumpkin pie was firmly identified with the northern, Yankee culture. When Sarah Josepha Hale lobbied for Thanksgiving to be made a national holiday during the 1850's, some in the South received her effort to expand the holiday as a political act. These Southern critics perceived her attempts to export the holiday and its pumpkin pie as an effort to also export Northern culture—including the rising anti-slavery sentiment of the North. Southern leaders denounced the spread of Thanksgiving as an imposition of Northern values on the South. Knoebel writes,

> [A]ccording to historian Melanie Kirkpatrick, Governor Wise of Virginia answered letters from Hale by telling her he wanted nothing to do with "this theatrical national claptrap of Thanksgiving, which has aided other causes in setting thousands of pulpits to preaching 'Christian politics.'" Wise's statement directly referred to anti-slavery politics.

For Governor Wise and other Southern leaders, Hale's Thanksgiving was not simply about pie, but about whose culture and whose values would define national identity. Hale finally achieved her goal when President Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. While pumpkin pie certainly was not the *cause* of the Civil War, it is notable that food was embroiled in divisive politics of cultural identity.

And, as you may know, the politics of Thanksgiving and national identity remain alive today. I suspect that as children many of us were taught that Thanksgiving began when the Pilgrims sat down for a friendly harvest dinner with the local Indians. Yet, today Native Americans challenge this saccharin image of unity and peace. They see the arrival of white European settlers on these shores as anything but benign and instead mark the day as one of mourning.

In 2016, our own UU General Assembly adopted a business resolution that called for us to explore our historical roots to these white European Puritans and the celebration of Thanksgiving. For a congregation like ours, begun by Puritans in the 1600's, this challenge clearly lands at our doorstep. When we gather around the table for a Thanksgiving meal and a pumpkin pie, in what ways do we reinforce a national identity that celebrates the successful colonization of these lands by white European settlers? In what ways does this

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joyful celebration of Thanksgiving erase the violence and loss wrought upon the Wampanoag and other Native Americans of these lands? As we reach for the pumpkin pie, do we also pause to consider how our bounty emerges from a legacy of colonial theft and violence? As a celebratory meal rooted in a particular place and culture, questions like these provoke serious reflection about how food can teach cultural symbols of who we are.

Food is a basic human need that connects us. *And* food often acts as a powerful carrier of culture. What we eat, with whom, and with what people helps to define our identity. This may sound like a big, complex identity, but I'm sure its one with which we are all intimately familiar. In other words, how did your Thanksgiving go? Who was there? What did you eat? How was it decided what would be on the menu?

In our house, we hosted my partner's siblings and their families. In a group of just 14, we ranged from less than 8 months to over 80. Five different national identities were present—French, Moroccan, English, Russian, and American. Our meal was a joint effort of multiple contributions. And, while we shared a common table, it was also apparent that a beloved, 'traditional' food for one was an unusual, 'foreign' food for another. Yet, for the most part, we all ate the same food.

As it turns out, eating the *same* food matters. In a recent study, social scientists Kaitlin Wooley and Ayelet Fishbach researched the role of eating the same food in building trust. Their experiment paired together two strangers in a trust building exercise. Specifically, they were assigned roles as management or labor in a wage dispute. During the rounds of negotiation, some pairs were given no food, some pairs were given different foods, and still others were given the same food. While those eating different foods reached agreement after an average of 7.3 rounds, those with the same food reached an agreement within an average of only 3.6 rounds. About half the time!

In their conclusion, Wooley and Fishback note that eating the same food is not actually an indicator of whether or not people will *like* each other or are trustworthy. And yet, their research shows that people respond to eating the same food as if it is a valid indicator—"feeling closer to and more trusting of those who consume as they do." Wooley and Fishback conclude:

> In this way, food serves as a social lubricant and is especially beneficial for new relationships where people have limited information about the other person and are forming first impressions. In consuming similarly, people can immediately begin to feel camaraderie and develop a bond, leading to smoother transactions from the start.

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In other words, if you're meeting someone for the first time and want to make a good impression, the old line, "I'll have what they're having" is a good strategy. Simply eating the same foods seems to cue a sense of trust.

In a NPR interview about their study, Fishbach explained, "Food is about bringing something into the body. And to eat the same food suggests that we are both willing to bring the same thing into our bodies." Putting food into our bodies is both necessary and dangerous. As anyone who has suffered from an allergic reaction or food poisoning knows, eating the *wrong* thing can have very bad effects. There is a vulnerability to eating. We seek sustenance, but also risk harm. And so, to me it makes sense that to both reach for the same food builds a bond. It's an unconscious affirmation of taking a risk together.

Food is about survival. "No matter what, we must eat to live." The *must eat* means that eating makes us vulnerable. Without food, our hunger risks discomfort, physical decline, and ultimately death. Hunger knows no religion. We all need to eat.

And so, eating brings us together in a shared project of sustaining survival and the flourishing of life. The kitchen table, as Joy Harjo's poem suggests, becomes the site of learning about living. We come to the table because we must eat to sustain our bodies. And, at the table we learn the culture and manners of our family and our people. At the table, we learn, we gossip, we dream.

And, we listen. Chef Michael Symon has said, "Sitting down for dinner not only helps you learn, but also teaches you how to listen - which I feel is the most important skill to have. I remember as a kid going around the table listening to everyone's day. It was hard to have the manners not to interrupt back then." We listen and we learn at the table. We learn how to be men and women. We learn about our neighbors. We learn history. We learn attitudes and expressions of feelings . . . of the joy, sorrow, or struggle of life. Listening at the table, we learn the whole world.

Sometimes we learn by who is *not* at the table. If sharing food at a common table builds trust, then do we also reinforce a sense of distrust towards those who are absent at our table? With whom do we *not* eat...and why? It is of no small importance that the dream Dr. Martin Luther King extolled in his famous speech included "a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood." Someday, the slave owners and the slaves would not be divided, but sit at a common table. Someday, the violence and the enmity and the injustice would be overcome and people would share the same food, building trust.

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This dream of a common table is at the root of the Thanksgiving story. Knowing that "no matter what, we must eat to live," we gather at a common table to give thanks that we are alive, we are together, and we are at peace. And while we may find this to be true in some of our various Thanksgiving gatherings, it was not true of the alleged first Thanksgiving as the Wampanoag and white, European settlers warily shared a contested shore. Nor was it true in the 19th century as North and South, slaveholders and slaves sat at different tables, divided by oppression and mistrust. Nor was it true for Dr. King who spoke powerfully against the racial divides that remained a hundred years after the Civil War.

Nor is it true today. Our nation still shows fractures along racial lines that disproportionately incarcerate people of color, that hide the legacy of colonization upon Native Americans, and that send clear messages of exclusion to immigrants, Muslims, and Mexicans that they are not *really* welcome at the common table of US national identity.

Yet, we all need to eat to survive. At its best, the Thanksgiving story of a common table reflects the ethic of a welcoming hospitality that builds trust across differences. At its best, the Thanksgiving story calls us to live out the common religious mandate to feed the hungry.

"The world begins at the kitchen table." May the tables of our homes and our congregation be a place where the world is welcome . . . with its joys and sorrows, births and deaths, powerful and weak. We all must eat to live. Let us seek to build a truly common table.

So may it be.
Amen

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