

“Whose harvest?”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
Guest at Your Table Sunday
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Who likes turkey? [responses/hands]

Okay, for all the vegetarians out there, I'll be more inclusive. Who likes pumpkin pie? [responses/hands] Aha, a much more Universalist response, but I asked a much more Universalist question.

Imagine. It's Thanksgiving, and you're all seated around a table. There's room for everyone, because it's the ever-growing table that I suggested earlier this morning. If someone comes late, the table expands. You've finished the main course, and it's now time for dessert. Of course one of those desserts, trusting that there might be a number of options, is.....[congregational response: pumpkin pie]!

Let's say you're ten years old. You're still learning to share. It didn't completely take in kindergarten. A few Thanksgivings ago, your Aunt Tillie noticed your readiness to suggest that the pie be cut with a VERY large piece for YOU. She loves you, AND she's been paying attention to you since you were born. Today, she notices again your eagerness for dessert and says, “Hmmm...let's try something a bit different.” Since she's your favorite aunt, you nod, though still with your mouth watering for that very big piece that could be all yours. Aunt Tillie explains: “How about if you cut it into the same number of pieces as there are folks around the table? That would be how many?”

“Eighteen!” you gulp, wide-eyed. (Let's imagine the pie expands so that there really is enough for 18 small but visible pieces.)

Then Aunt Tillie adds: “After you cut it into eighteen pieces, everybody else at the table gets to take their helping first.”

Aunt Tillie has always been known for her fairness, and you do love her. You're just not too sure you really LIKE her right now. But you want to please her, and you're ten years old. All that you've learned about sharing is beginning to kick in, however slowly.

“Okay, it's a deal,” you answer. She hands you a knife, a sharp knife, which up until now you were never allowed to use. You're old enough, and that makes you sit up straighter in your chair, with an air of pride.

How would you cut the pie? [Responses...]

I'm wondering how the choice facing our 10-year-old is like the choice that our youngsters were given earlier this morning. How did you divvy up the harvest of pumpkins?
 [Responses...] [Note: Molly Nolan, our DRE, invited youngsters to the front of the sanctuary to sit in a circle around several small pumpkins. One youngster was asked to sit outside the circle. She invited those in the circle to divvy up the pumpkins in a way that they thought was fair and explained that the person sitting outside the circle hadn't had any opportunity even to get close to a Thanksgiving table. Ultimately the youngsters made sure that each received a fair share of the pumpkins, including the youngster outside the circle.]

And what does this have to do with how you as a 10-year-old—no matter what age you actually are—will divvy up the crowning glory of the Thanksgiving table, the pumpkin pie?
 [Responses...]

Remember the story that I shared earlier...the story of Don Mario Perez? Don and his wife, Joselinda Manueles, are coffee farmers in Honduras. They grow organic coffee and sell it through a coffee farm cooperative. Their cooperative participates in Equal Exchange. Our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee partners with Equal Exchange. Why? Because Don and Joselinda and other coffee farmers and cocoa farmers and tea growers will be paid FAIRLY for the hard work that they do. Equal Exchange is sometimes called "fair trade." Why do you suppose this is so? [Responses....]

It's just plain fair. Whose harvest is it anyway? If Don and Joselinda sold their coffee to a big corporation, who would get most of the harvest?
 [Responses...]

Think of Aunt Tillie as a leader in the coffee farm cooperative and all of us as participants, though from many miles away, by welcoming this Guest at Your Table [hold up] and making sure this guest is properly fed with our dollars and coins so that our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee can continue to partner with Equal Exchange and the coffee farm cooperative to which Don and Joselinda belong. Think of your Thanksgiving table where you're inspired by Aunt Tillie as a kind of "pumpkin pie cooperative" where everyone gets... "a piece of the pie" and no one gets to indulge an appetite that shortchanges anybody else.

Recall the story that Molly shared, the story of Christantus Mwandishi, a human rights activist on behalf of the Kakamega Rain Forest in Kenya. How to protect the rain forest, when his neighbors were cutting it down to make charcoal to sell so that they could buy food for their families? Soon the forest would be gone, but families would still be hungry, and our earth would be robbed of yet another rain forest. What was the issue? How to grow more trees fast enough to chop them down or how to feed families? [Responses...]

How to feed families. So Christantus founded the SoilFarm MultiCulture Group that taught folks who had been cutting down trees to grow food native to the region, enough to feed their families and to sell. Whose harvest is it—these hundreds of thousands of trees? Christantus and all who joined his group began to plant hundreds of thousands of new trees to replenish what had been destroyed. They learned to use techniques other than the application of harmful fertilizers for their food crops. They learned to keep the water pure, the forests healthy, and their families fed, all because of the vision and the hard work of Christantus and others who joined his group

AND because of all of us who feed our Guest at Your Table to support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee that partners with Christantus and his co-workers.

It's almost Thanksgiving, and as most of us sit around a table all but bending under the load of mouth-watering food, how will we share the harvest in front of us? How will we share the harvest of resources that made it possible for us to grow or buy or both the feast that usually leaves us stuffed? How will we move beyond *imagining* a table that expands so that more and more find a place there? What is our "enough" and what is our "more than enough" that suggests we share and share generously.

What if you had taken that pumpkin pie that you were craving earlier and, without anybody paying attention until it was too late, you had picked up your table knife and sliced a piece bigger than any tummy should have a right to hold....what if? But you didn't. You were given a choice that was part of a quite different bargain. And just before you sliced that pie into 18 equal pieces, you asked to be excused long enough to go to your room and take a generous share of your allowance to bring back to the table so that a special guest in the form of a box [hold up] could have a piece of the pie also!

Just maybe you'll grow up to be an Aunt Tillie or an Uncle Willie who loves another child so much that, come Thanksgiving, you lean over and gently suggest: "Hmm...let's try something a bit different."

Whose harvest is it anyway?

Let's sing together those last two verses that awaken our conscience and our vision...

Sources:

Stories of Hope, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, 2014-2015.

Wake, Now, My Senses, Words: Thomas J.S. Mikelson (1936 -); Music: Traditional Irish melody, harmony by Carlton R. Young (1926 -), in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993, 298-299.