

Toward a Theology of Smoked Turkey

A sermon by Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL
September 21, 2014

Story for All Ages

This is a true story related by UU minister Rob Eller-Isaacs. A number of years ago, while Rob was on sabbatical, he and his family traveled to the Middle East. One leg of the journey was a ferry ride from the Sinai Peninsula to Aqaba in Jordan. But there were three things that Rob had overlooked, three things that would prove central to this tale. The first was that it was Ramadan, the Islamic holy month when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, the holy month during which it is most auspicious to make the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. More than 2.5 million pilgrims per year make the journey to Mecca. The second thing Rob did not know, but was soon to learn, was that Aqaba and this ferry were on one of the primary pilgrimage routes. The third missing piece of information I will get to later.

The ferry, meant to hold twelve hundred passengers, was on that day destined to carry over six thousand including, by some minor miracle, the Eller-Isaacs family. Boarding the ferry, they watched in fascination as each group of pilgrims carved out a space on the ship's deck. As the ferry left port the pilgrims turned toward Mecca to pray. As the ship turned north the pilgrims adjusted their position always facing the holy city of Mecca. Rob relates that three black dolphins leapt for joy alongside boat.

As often seems to be the case with travel the trip took much longer than anticipated, and when the ferry finally reached Aqaba the sun had already set. The port officials, all good Muslims, had gone home to ritually break the fast leaving a note that all passengers should remain on board until the officials returned. Now, imagine 6,000 people who have not had anything to eat or drink for a full day and who have been crowded onto a boat meant to carry one-fifth their number. Rob relates that although the raised voices spoke in Arabic, the tenor and object of the comments was easily discernible. Finally the boat captain made an announcement over the loud speaker, and a delegation was selected to go below decks to the buses that had carried the pilgrims. Baskets and boxes and bags of food were brought up on deck, rugs were rolled out and each family began their evening meal.

Not having anticipated such a long journey the Eller-Isaacs had planned to eat when they reached Aqaba and brought no food with them. Embarrassed by this lack of foresight, they tried to make themselves invisible, not an easy task for a hungry Caucasian American family traveling with 6,000 Muslims. Then something happened. Someone noticed. Someone saw them standing there empty handed. He reached into the family basket and rising from his place, brought a handful of sweet dates. Then another and another and another rose up and came across the deck to share their food. You see, the third thing Rob had not realized is that it is a great blessing to be allowed to share your

bounty with a hungry stranger, especially at Ramadan. What seemed at first a kindly gesture became in moments an astounding deluge of generosity. Hundreds of people came up to offer food: ground meat and oranges, figs and dates and boiled eggs and other treats not easily identified.

“And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”

Reading

Excerpt from “The Amazing Grace of Each Other” by Jenny Weil in *Not for Ourselves Alone*, Burton Carley and Laurel Hallman, eds.

For several years, I attended church without joining. I loved my UU church; I also found it wanting. I recall telling a visiting consultant that our church ought to be friendlier, more welcoming. About this time, I became engaged to a man I’d been dating. As we discussed marriage, he asked about which church we would join. Balking at two big commitments at once – church membership and marriage – I resisted, but when I came to understand his determination on this point, I relented. We joined the UU church, and this as much as anything else occasioned a small but life-changing epiphany: We, the congregation, are the church. If “church” needed to be friendlier, I would have to offer my hand in coffee hour. How much of the welcome I received I had taken for granted. How easily I default to an atomized narrative about how I encounter the world, when in fact there is a truthful and more promising story about how we, together, create the world, our lives defining and testifying to the possibilities.

Belonging to our church has been a blessing, unconditional in the love it offers, but demanding in the way of all meaningful relationships. Like marriage, like parenting, belonging to church has been a liberating constraint. We have chosen this place and these people, and our lives and values can be measured by the quality of our commitment. Our covenant means that we’re willing to be transformed by one another and to be accountable for our effect on others. We have thrown in our lot together.

Reading

Excerpt from “It’s an Open House” from *How We Behave at the Feast* by Dwight Currie

Do you remember the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes? In all four gospels the same story is told. It seems everywhere Jesus went he was attracting big crowds of people. On one such day, the gathering was particularly large and no one had brought anything to eat. So, when the mob turned hungry, Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fishes, blessed them, and fed all five thousand people. There were even twelve baskets of leftovers to gather when everyone was finished. All four gospels agree on these numbers. All four agree that it was a miracle. All four tell the story.

Only *two* of the gospel writers, Matthew and Mark, report on the *second* such event. This time, Jesus has seven loaves of bread (instead of five) and a few fishes (I’m assuming

that a few is more than two) and with these more ample provisions he fed only *four* thousand people, and had only *seven* baskets of leftovers.

So, what have we learned?

1. You can never really plan for these things. Sometimes five loaves and two fishes are enough for five thousand—and sometimes you’ll need seven loaves and a few fishes for only four thousand. And don’t count on leftovers. You just never know.
2. The first time you perform a miracle of hospitality, everyone is going to talk about it—just like all four gospel writers reported on the first feat. But the next time you make your magic, maybe only half the people will notice. This didn’t discourage Jesus, and it shouldn’t discourage you.

At the Open House of life you must learn to be accommodating, flexible, and resilient. People come unexpectedly into your life, and just as unexpectedly they sometimes go. The trick is to welcome them and enjoy their company while they are here. There’s always room for one more at the table, there’s always a place for another child to sleep, and with a loaf, a fish, and a prayer you can sometimes work miracles. But don’t count on it.

Sermon

Last Saturday was the annual observance of that traditional ecclesiastical ritual, the Turkey Smoke, the fellowship event by which we launch ourselves back into the church year with turkeys smoked in the back yard and accompanied by myriad potluck dishes. After the turkeys had been carved, the table loaded and grace said, the buffet line began. As if of one mind, John and I simultaneously glanced at the pans of carved meat, surveyed the line stretching around the perimeter of the room and looked back at each other. “We’re not going to have enough food,” we agreed.

Now, everyone who has ever attended a party, let alone thrown one, knows that the most desperate failure of hospitality is to leave some of the guests hungry. Almost any other hosting mishap is easier to bear than watching the last six people leave the buffet table with nothing other than a few olives and the parsley garnish on their plates. It is the point in the evening where you begin to long for five loaves, two fish and one miracle. So I couldn’t help but bring to mind the stories from various world religions of times of seeming scarcity that turned out to be, in fact, times of great abundance.

One of those stories is, of course, the miracle of the loaves and fishes from the Christian tradition, which was the subject of one of our readings this morning. Another was the story Rosie told from our colleague Rob Eller-Isaacs traveling to Aqaba. One ancient tale, one modern—but both tales of insufficiency turned into abundant generosity. They echo stories that occur in our own lives and in the lives of others we know. They are stories recorded in the books we use to teach our children and to guide our own lives. They relate a theme so old and prevalent that the first tale, the biblical story of feeding

the five thousand, occurs six times in the four gospels of the Christian New Testament. Six times. If that tells us nothing else, it says “Pay attention; important story here!”

I have seen commentary on biblical the story that says it is repeated six times because the message of God’s bounty is so important. The idea that God has provided a glorious bounty for humanity, and continues to provide that bounty, is a central and important one to Christianity. The writers of the New Testament wanted us to marvel at God’s benevolence, to be filled with gratitude and reassured of God’s eternal care, says this interpretation.

If simple abundance is the point of the story, then any number of theologians have missed that point. Six times. For indeed the theologies that many of us left behind were not theologies of abundance, but theologies of scarcity that told us there was not enough—not enough seats at the table for every person without regard to gender, race, creed or sexual orientation, and certainly not enough room in heaven for every soul whose imperfections run contrary to decreed beliefs. These are theologies that run contrary to that central Christian tenet of abundance.

My own theology leads me to a different interpretation of the story. Yes, the universe, from whatever source, does provide an unquestionable diversity and abundance, but I would say that the writers of the New Testament wanted not only to call this to our attention, but to repeat, six times, the lesson that it is up to us to share the bounty. If there is indeed such splendid wealth in the world, enough food to feed every person, enough cloth to clothe every person, enough building material to provide shelter for every person, why is it that only some have adequate food and clothing and shelter? The problem lies not in the abundance, but in the distribution, and that is what these stories call us to address.

The Eller-Isaacs family experienced it on the ferry. There was plenty of food. It just belonged to other people. In the story of the loaves and fishes, there was plenty of food; it just belonged to other people. Until everyone saw the deeper calling and found joy in sharing. The biblical story tells us that it was Jesus and the apostles who provided the food, but frankly I find it hard to believe that people who live in the desert go out for the day without any food. You know you can kill a good story with facts, and the miraculously multiplying food is not meant as food for the body but food for the spirit; still, the reality that people who came to hear Jesus brought their own lunch does not diminish the miracle for me. This is very human miracle of willingness to give, that everyone gave of what they had with them so that all shared in the abundance. This is a miracle I can embrace, not one of supernatural powers but of the power of hospitality—a hospitality that extends beyond the boundaries of your home to include everyone you meet, to include all who were there to hear Jesus speak. That was the power that Jesus brought, the power to share what he had without reservation. It was a power that inspired a similar generosity in others, the same power that Muhammad brought that lives on in the Muslim call to give alms for support of the poor, the orphan, the stranger. It is the same power that lives in Judaism to offer of what you have to others who have less, to welcome the stranger to your table.

It is an ethic common to all religions that come from the same desert region of the Middle East, this idea that you owe hospitality to everyone who may wander by. It is almost ironic that residents of the least arable land, those who would be expected to have the least bounty of food, created a culture of unquestioned giving. Perhaps it is just because they know how hard food was to come by in the desert that they readily gave it to those without any.

But food and sharing it is not really the sum total of hospitality. We often conflate the two because leaving someone hungry is that baseline failure that every host and hostess dread, but hospitality in a culture of abundance runs deeper than providing the basic needs of food and shelter. It entails seeing, hearing, honoring the other. It entails the desire to fully know and be known. As writer Vanna Bonta said, “There is no hospitality like understanding.” Noticing and attending to our guests is one of the key components of church hospitality. We do love to share a snack, no doubt about that, but *here* it is about attending to who we are and what is of meaning to us. The miracle stories in Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures about sharing food aren’t really about sharing physical, literal food, but about sharing what sustains our spirits. It starts with something as simple as greeting visitors, as basic as being friendly, but it is the heart and soul of church community.

Membership committees around the world spend a great deal of time and effort on finding ways to make sure church hospitality includes such basics as not leaving visitors standing in the corner by themselves. Some hand out differently colored coffee mugs to visitors signaling that they should be attended to. Some ask first time visitors to stand during the service and introduce themselves. I am not a big proponent of these methods because it is not up to visitors to do our work of hospitality, but also because they don’t work. No amount of identifying visitors will ever work until we *all* take on the responsibility of welcoming them. I can’t tell you how frequently I visit other churches that people stare at me just long enough to identify that they don’t know me and then turn away without a word. If we want a friendly church then all we have to do is be friendly, to everyone, not just to our friends and not just to visitors. It is exactly what Jenny Weil wrote in our reading this morning. “If ‘church’ needed to be friendlier, I would have to offer my hand in coffee hour. How much of the welcome I received I had taken for granted.”

I invite you to think back to the first time you came to this church or to another church. How did you feel? Were you greeted warmly, left to read the pamphlets in the racks or asked to chair the Finance Committee? I remember very well my first visit to a UU Church, and it is not a fond memory. It’s something of a wonder I ever joined that church.

The visioning process we undertook in the past few days asked us to look back at some of our best experiences in this church. It asked the question “what are you most proud of?” I am most proud that visitors and new members regularly report receiving a genuine, friendly greeting here. That is a wonderful thing to offer, but how many of us, like Jenny

Weil, take it for granted that it is someone else's job to welcome visitors, to help new members become oriented to events, to find ways to become involved and connected? There *are* committees that focus on these things and committees that do a great job at it, but putting responsibility on a small group to make *all* people feel welcome will never work. Hospitality is the work we all own.

Most people, when they share what they remember about coming to a church for the first time, talk about one particular person who took the time to speak with them. They don't remember what the sermon was about or what the choir sang or what a committee did. They remember one particular person who offered their time and attention. Just think about that. If you have found something affirming and sustaining here, you can offer that to someone else just by being the one to extend your hand during coffee hour, by setting aside committee business or forgoing a conversation with long time friends to greet someone you haven't spoken with before. Just remembering that we are all a part of the hospitality of the church in even small ways makes a very real difference.

Of course, real hospitality means running risks, and one of those risks is the possibility that you will feel foolish greeting someone as a newcomer when you greeted them the same way last week or when they've been a member for 30 years. It happens. I do it all the time. But remember, that feeling of foolishness is *your* own feeling. Rarely do the people being greeted feel that a sincere welcome and wish to know more about them is foolish. A sincere welcome need not assume that someone is new or that you have never spoken to each other before. If you see someone you don't know you don't really have to research whether they are a first time visitor or not—just greet them. What difference whether they have been coming for 2 weeks or 2 years— just say hello. If you encounter each person with the curiosity to know something new about them and to offer something of yourself, you have no cause to ever feel foolish.

The other real risk that you do have to run, however, is the possibility of being changed by the encounter. True hospitality offers that possibility, the possibility that you will be different than you were before. As Kathleen Norris wrote, "True hospitality is marked by an open response to the dignity of each and every person." An open response means open to the possibility that rather than a newcomer changing to fit into what is here, we might have to change to meet them where they are.

Still, the risks of offering hospitality are dwarfed by its benefits, so let us make here a universe in which we live from our abundance. Let us invite others to share in what we have found here. Let us reach out to the wider community wildly and gleefully. Let us bring here our own gifts that all might share in the abundance.

Looking at what we have rather than what we don't is a powerful way to live. Matching what we have with what we need rather than with what we want is a powerful way to shift the problem of distribution. In this season of harvest, as we live among the bounty of nature, can we find ever new ways to live from our abundance? Can we look not at what is lacking, but what is overflowing? Can we not live from our blessings and our gratitude, to give of what we have and still have what we need?

Living from our abundance does not mean that we will never again worry about there being enough turkey for everyone. Learning the lessons of abundance can sometimes take a lot of practice. But there was, indeed, plenty of food at the Turkey Smoke, so much so that it ran to take-home bags of leftovers. And there was not only plenty of food, there was an overflowing abundance of good will and sharing, and all that feeds the soul. May we help each other on the way, giving of our friendship and care, with joy, knowing that these are always renewable resources.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2014 Jacqueline R. Clement. All rights reserved.