

Mille Grazie!

A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE

Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga

November 21, 2010

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. This morning we have a zipper song to tie the service together. In a zipper song, most of the song is the same, verse-to-verse; just one or two words change. Kate will play through the song once, and then the choir will sing it. And you can join in when you think you know it. OK, play through once and we'll sing it three times.

HYMN: "Thank You!"

Thank you for this day,
Thank you for this day.
Thank you, thank you, I do thank you.
Thank you for this day.

GREETINGS

PRELUDE: "Thankful"

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Mary Hunter, would you please light the chalice?

To kindle our chalice this morning, I have a passage from *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau.

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the brain or the hands.

Sometimes, in a summer morning, I sat in my sunny doorway from

sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amid the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around, until, by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.

I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

STORY: I'm Glad about That!

Today we begin our annual program to support the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Guest at Your Table is an annual tradition in which we take home a box featuring people that Service Committee has worked with recently.

People like Opoka Kenneth, who is now using oxen teams to plow land for several families. The Service Committee is working with Opoka and others to help them rebuild their houses and revitalize traditions.

Maral is a teacher in Afghanistan. She participated in the Teacher Training for Human Rights and learned how to incorporate human rights into her lessons, focusing especially on the rights of women and girls.

Carmen Molina is a leader for workers' rights. During her 24 years working on a banana plantation in Guatemala, Carmen witnessed many injustices against workers, particularly women. She led an international training on workers' rights and is spreading important information over the radio to workers seeking justice.

These people and others are our "guests," and we are asked to share our blessings with them by putting spare change in the box at our

daily meals. Guest at Your Table is a way to remind ourselves of our own abundance and share that with others around the world through the work of the committee. Skip Stevens is leading the effort this year and she asked Maurine Olin to bring us a story.

Thanks for being here today. You are free to go now and remember to be thankful.

CHILDREN'S RECEPTIONAL

OFFERTORY: "That Grace May Abound"

In your bulletin today are three 3x5 cards. What I'd like you to do is write one word on each card. Or write one person's name. The word or name is something or someone that makes you grateful. Something or someone for which or for whom you are grateful. You can do that during the offertory, and we'll use the cards a little later in the service. Here's a box of pens and pencils if you need one.

I don't have an anecdote or light story for the offertory today. Funny thing about stories concerning Thanksgiving or gratitude. They are in short supply. I have several books of stories, illustrations and anecdotes, but nowhere could I find a story about Thanksgiving or gratitude. To be sure, every source book has good things to say about gratitude, like it's the least of virtues and that ingratitude is the worst of vices. And there were many exhortations from many people that we humans should be grateful, not the least for being alive. But no light story, no humorous anecdote.

And to tell the truth, I don't feel so light today. I caught a little cold earlier in the week, and I haven't had much energy. On Wednesday, I discovered that part of my roof is rotting away and will have to be replaced. I'm tempted to say, "Why should I be thankful?"

But I take to heart all the exhortations to be thankful. And I am

thankful. For you and for my family and for my friends and for being alive. Thanksgiving is Thursday. If you would like to join us here at the church, Kate and I are roasting turkeys and fixing stuffing and gravy. Please bring a dish to share and sign up on the roster on the kitchen door.

Today we share the plate with the Community Kitchen. The Community Kitchen has been helping homeless people since 1992. Sadly, the need for their service is growing.

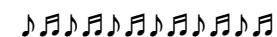
How many homeless in this area? More than 4100 homeless individuals each year in Chattanooga; about 1100 homeless children in public schools, about 400-500 people sleep outside or in shelters, and nearly 100 of them in families.

How old are they? 61% of homeless people are between the ages of 30 and 54; 24% are children under 18, and 3% are over the age of 60.

What are their lives like? About 40% of the homeless families in Chattanooga have experienced recent domestic violence. Nearly a quarter are veterans.

I know they will be thankful for your help and generosity.

Now we will collect the morning offering for the support of the Community Kitchen. Please be generous when the plate comes your way. If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the

blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

For a Hymn of Thanksgiving, let's sing another verse of "Thank You!"

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

There is no place like home.
Home is where the heart is.
Lose home...and lose heart.
I feel the truth of these words
For home and heart are bound together.
The state of one reflects the state of the other.
For who has not lost her home
Without feeling like her heart has been cut out?
And whose heart does not heal faster by being home?
So help me with this prayer,
For I have a brother in need.
He is beloved and has talents to share.
But he does not know this.
He lives on the street and eats out of garbage cans.
For living this wretched life, he is blamed and mocked.
I do not know his name, but call him Homeless.
I do not know what has injured him.
In fact, I do not know him at all.

I have only seen her
sleeping in doorways, wandering aimlessly
Staring at me with hollow eyes.
She barely survives, yet her legacy, as a human being, is to thrive.

Blame cannot move her from her pain, but only increase it.
So I release all blame now and call for compassion to fill me.

I pray for energy that transforms.
I pray that I never lose sight of her humanity—or mine.
I am so grateful that I have a home;
That I have a place in which to eat, bathe, rest and love.
I cannot imagine the chaos of living without one.

Spirit of Life, fill Homeless, who has so many faces
male, female, old and young
Fill Homeless with the knowledge of a most intimate love.
For this is our vision:
That each of us know our own worth and be nourished.
Spirit of Life, enter our hearts, minds and bodies
Awaken within us knowledge of our holiness and gifts.
call them—and me—
To the work we know is before us.
So that no one is known by the name "Homeless."

Thank You
Thank You
Thank You

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,

now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

HERE

Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,
brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustain and renew it
be sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to new ways in which to live our lives.

SERMON: Mille Grazie

I believe that religion is primarily an affair of gratitude. Now you may think that religion is primarily an affair of believing, and if you are not sure how to go about “believing,” you may think that you are not a religious person. Gratitude, on the other hand, is something that all of us can practice, and that makes us all religious.

Whatever your beliefs about faith and grace, gratitude is basic. Like hope, trust, and love, gratitude is both a feeling and a spiritual practice. Though we have little control over our immediate feelings, we can decide to cultivate the ground in which those feelings thrive.

Do you recall when you were young being taught to say “Thank you.” when you were helped or given something? A young person who does not say “Thank you.” convincingly is considered spoiled, and an older person who does not have this habit is considered arrogant. Why? Words of thanks signal acknowledgment of another’s part in benefitting our lives. “Thank you.” adds a human connection. It says, “I noticed you were there, and I am glad.”

Our thank-yous remind us that we are dependent on those around us. The words acknowledge the web of relationships in which we live. To neglect your thank-yous is not only rude; it is out of touch with reality, an implicit claim of independence and privilege. The practice of saying “Thank you.” is good for our souls and a reality check on our tendency to think we don’t need others. This is not only important in our relationships with other people, it is important in our relationship with life and everything in it.

Suppose there is no one to thank. Suppose you are an atheist or an agnostic or you have no opinion. If you don’t believe in a “thankable” God, how can you develop gratitude? And why bother if there is no one to thank.

You don’t have to believe that there is a Divine Someone out there collecting praise to experience gratitude. The important thing is to notice your gratitude and express it, if only to yourself. “Thank you, life!” you might say, if “Thank you, God.” doesn’t work for you. When your grand daughter rushes into your arms, when we are struck by the beauty of a sunset, or when we experience one of those wonderful moments when we connect deeply with someone, just say quietly, “Thanks so much.” When you practice gratitude like that, there may be no one in particular to thank, but everyone heard you.

Suppose you are in one of the troughs of life. Things are truly hideous right now. Sometimes we suffer too much to feel honestly grateful. There are days, weeks, months, when we are overwhelmed by problems or pain, tragedy or disappointment. At those times, we don't feel lucky to be alive and certainly don't feel like celebrating. In their desire to make us feel better, good-hearted people are likely to say things like "You should be grateful that your older child is still alive, the cancer was only in one breast, you still have a spouse even though you lost your job."

When we can't feel grateful, we can't. At least, not right then. (Sidebar to good-hearted people: You are right, the suffering person in front of you surely still has some good things in his life. But this realization has to come from her, and it will come more quickly if you simply listen with an open heart and don't give advice.)

When things are hard, especially if they are awful for a long time, resolve to make a practice of gratitude—to really work at re-establishing your sense of thanksgiving. This is a very healing practice. In the midst of grieving for a loved one, we can be grateful for the care of friends, for the flowers that are still blooming, for the kindness of strangers, or even that the car still starts and the sun still rises. Being intentional about noticing these things is a deep spiritual practice.

During the Passover season, at our Seder supper, we recite a litany taken from a Jewish song called "Dayeinu." Passover celebrates the Exodus from Egypt, when Hebrew slaves were freed and escaped into a difficult forty years in the wilderness. In the song "Dayeinu," the leader lists all of the things that God did during the Exodus story. After each, the congregation sings "Dayeinu," which means, "It would have been enough." Let's try it, shall we? Your line is "Dayeinu."

Had God brought us out of Egypt
and not divided the sea for us,

Dayeinu.

Had God divided the sea
and not permitted us to cross on dry land,

Dayeinu.

Had God permitted us to cross the sea on dry land
and not sustained us for forty years in the desert,

Dayeinu.

You get the idea. If only we had been released from slavery in Egypt, that would have been enough. But we received so much more. "Dayeinu" is a way of saying, "There are gifts even in the midst of this hard time." So a new mother might say to herself:

If my baby had been born healthy, but not beautiful,

Dayeinu.

If he had been born healthy and beautiful, but I
had to struggle to care for him,

Dayeinu.

If she had been healthy and beautiful, and my
mother came to care for us both, but I had to
return to a nine-to-five job,

Dayeinu.

But I have a flexible job, a loving mother, a beautiful and healthy
baby, and it is so much more than enough.

Perhaps most insidious to our sense of gratitude is the great demon, busy-ness. There are times when we simply get too busy to notice all the wonderful things and people and relationships around us. It's easy to get revved up and neglect to notice our gratitude, so it is best to find ways to make gratitude a routine.

A few years ago, Oprah, on her TV show, encouraged people to keep a gratitude journal. Sometimes people have a wall of photographs of people and places for which they are grateful, bring their gratitude to mind each morning over their coffee, or begin the evening meal or bedtime prayers by naming something for which they are grateful.

The poet W. H. Auden once wrote that on the dull days of life, we must practice our “scales of rejoicing.” Right now Kate is learning to play the harp and she practices her scales so that when it comes time to perform, the music will flow naturally from her fingers. Likewise, we can make a practice of our gratitude that will sustain us in both the wonderful and difficult times of our lives.

What say we get up, stretch our legs and walk around a bit? Right there, in the middle of the sanctuary, is a glass bowl. What I like you to do is place your 3x5 cards in the bowl. After the service, I will fix the cards to a big board and make a collage so that we’ll be reminded of our gratitude.

It’s just enough to express your gratitude, just express it. As you walk toward the bowl, please sing another verse of “Thank You!” but this time, insert the word or words that you wrote on your cards. Given the number of people we have, I suspect we’ll sing the verse several times, so you have a chance to express your gratitude for several different things, maybe even some you didn’t write down.

HYMN: “Thank You!”

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

POSTLUDE: “We Shall Go Out with Joy”

We’ll end our service today with “We Shall Go Out with Joy,” a hymn we’ve sung a few times before. We’ll sing it through twice.

We shall go out with joy
And be led forth with peace
And the mountains and the hills
Shall break forth before you,

There’ll be shouts of joy

And the trees of the field
Shall clap, shall clap their hands

And the trees of the field
Shall clap their hands.
And the trees of the field
Shall clap their hands.

And the trees of the field
Shall clap their hands.
And we’ll go out with joy.

We shall go out with joy
And be led forth with peace
And the mountains and the hills
Shall break forth before you,

There’ll be shouts of joy
And the trees of the field
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Shall clap their hands.
And we’ll go out with joy.