

***The Open Door***  
**Thanksgiving Reflection on Guest at Your Table**  
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska  
UU Church of Minnetonka  
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RESPONSIVE READING:

**We Lift Up Our Hearts in Thanks**

Richard M. Fewkes

For the sun and the dawn  
Which we did not create

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For the moon and the evening  
Which we did not make

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For food which we plant  
But cannot grow

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For friends and loved ones  
We have not earned and cannot buy

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For this gathered company which welcomes us as we are  
From wherever we have come

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For all our free churches that keep us human and  
Encourage us in our quest for beauty, truth and love

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For all things which come to us  
As gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves

***We lift up our hearts in thanks***

For gifts of life and love and friendship

***We lift up our hearts in thanks this day.***

***The Open Door***  
**Thanksgiving Reflection on Guest at Your Table**

*(Note: this sermon/reflection was presented from a memorized outline while walking around the sanctuary; I wrote down these words later that Sunday evening from memory, after I returned home, so while these paragraphs are what I intended to say, it may be that these are not all the actual words I spoke. KHS)*

You've heard many stories this morning about how the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee helps people around the world through Guest At Your Table program, a program they've been doing for years. Each year at this time we take these little boxes [hold one in my hand] and put in money at each meal, signifying the amount of money we are donating to others around the world to help them eat and live in decency according to basic human rights.

This UU practice of having a “Guest at Your Table” has always reminded me of the Jewish holiday of Passover, specifically the ritual Seder meal. Has anyone been to a Seder? Well, during that meal, Jews eat several specific foods, each one of which reminds them of who they are and where they came from. The entire ritual meal is a reminder the Jews give to themselves that they were once slaves in captivity in Egypt, and that Moses freed them from slavery.

At the dinner table during the Seder meal, they always make room for one more chair than there are people, with one more plate and one more glass of wine. This setting is made for the prophet Elijah, who is said to be the herald of the Messiah. Near the end of the Seder meal, the youngest child goes to the door and opens it, symbolizing the act of leaving the door open for Elijah, as a sign of welcome, to come in and bring with him a new age of compassion and peace.

When we do Guest at Your Table, this box always reminds me of that ritual, of making a space in our midst for the visitor, the stranger, the guest in our house, and to remind ourselves to leave the door open to unknown, open to the mystery, open to that which may provide us with transformation.

With this in mind, I feel compelled to share something with you that I’ve been wrestling with for the past week. I had not planned to share this with you today until about a day or two ago, but I wanted to share this with you because this is bigger than me, and I feel we all need to be in on the discussion. Next Sunday I will not be here, but we will have a guest speaker, Julia Dinsmore, who will be speaking on homelessness. As a guest speaker we will also have Bob Fisher, the shoe repair guy here in Wayzata who originated the annual sleep-out to raise money for the homeless. This past week we received an email from Julia, an email sent to a list of friends and acquaintances, letting them – and us – know that her son’s house in Duluth recently burned down. She was writing to ask for donations of supplies – towels, blankets, dishes – that she could then take to her son.

This request brought a powerful tearing to my heart for a number of reasons. It reminded me of the year I spent in New York City as a college student. I didn’t have much money then, and I lived mostly on peanut butter and jelly, and macaroni and cheese from a box. And to save money by not paying for the subway, I walked the three miles to and from school. Each day I took that walk, I would encounter five or ten or twenty homeless people asking for money. I could barely feed myself, but if I helped each one, if I gave a dollar to each homeless person I saw, I would soon run out of money and not be able to feed myself...but I wanted to help them.

So I want us to help our guest speaker because she is a person in need, and if you are able to help, I encourage you to bring some towels or blankets or other household items next week if you are able to help Julia and her son. But to be honest, I also feel uncomfortable with our congregation helping individuals we don’t know when we don’t have a clear sense of mission and vision. And we don’t have a clear understanding – like the Jews during the Seder meal – about who we are on questions and issues like this. A request like this also makes me uncomfortable because it brings up for me the ways we may not have responded to others of our own members who have been in similar situations.

Similar to my experience in New York, we struggle here with our own budget, yet we also want to be generous and reach out and help. But because the need in the world is so great, especially now, if we respond to all requests like this from all people we don’t know, then the long-term

ramifications are that the church becomes a social service agency, being reactive to each individual request, with all our energies and our resources (time, money, physical items) going into being reactive. And we end up never looking at the larger picture. We end up becoming and sustaining a reactive social service agency, rather than implementing a long-term inspirational vision as an agent of transformation in the world.

We are not a social service agency. We are not set up to be a social service agency. This year IOCP created a goal of raising \$2 million in order to help 939 families in need. We are not capable in this church of raising \$2 million by ourselves each year to help families in need. Yet I do want this congregation to help other families outside our congregation, but I want policy in place – compassionate policy – that guides us as an institution, looking outward, about how to do that. I want our Board, or our Social Justice Ministry, or some congregational institutional entity to say, “we will adopt a family (or 10 or 100 families) each year at this time of year, and since we already have a partnership with IOCP, we will channel our efforts and our work through them, since they are already set up as a social service agency and know how to do this work better than we do.”

That’s one of the reasons I joined a church and later became a minister: to be part of something larger than myself. As part of a vibrant congregation, then I become more than simply reactive. Then I become part of a larger entity with more potential to be proactive. I want our church, I want THE church to be not just a muddling puddle of reactivity, but a proactive transformative force in the world. And I am seeking a way we can best do that.

This reminds me of another story told about an old Rabbi in the old country who once told his community that the prophet Elijah would be revealed at his Seder. At the hour of the Seder, almost the whole community was gathered in the Rabbi’s house. At the hour when the door was to be opened, the appointed child went to the front of the house and opened the door. And no one was there. The Rabbi sat there with a beautiful smile on his face, but the people were crushed. Seeing the look of bitter disappointment on his people’s faces, the Rabbi asked them what was wrong. And they told him. The Rabbi shook his head, with a look that was possibly a mixture of anger and sadness. “Do you think that Elijah the Prophet comes in through the door?” he asked them. “Elijah comes in through the heart.”

On this day celebrating gratitude and the power of the unknown, may we find and use the courage to open the door to our hearts and open ourselves to the possibility of transformation.