

“Potluck in Heaven”

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My grandmother was, at one point, the only person in the world who could get me to eat bacon. Somewhere around middle school, I decided I wanted to stop eating pork. I had explained this to my grandmother, saying I didn't feel right about eating animals that were smarter than my dog. (And, for the record, my dog was not smart.)

I remember this conversation very clearly. My grandmother, on the other hand, did not remember. For everything else, she had a good memory until the day she died. She kept track of all of the good news and bad news for the whole family. She remembered to bring in the wash from the clothesline. She remembered how to can applesauce without a recipe. She was a logistical genius with arranging all of our visits to the farm. Somehow the lack of pork in my diet did not compute.

During our regular visits up the mountain, I would wake up last in a crowded household and my grandmother would say, "Oh, you're up. I saved you some bacon." Every time. I don't recommend ignoring a loved one's preferences, but in this case, it worked out. I could not say no to this person who was expressing her love with food, who went out of her way to make a hot breakfast, and who had guarded my portion from my brothers. So I forgot that she forgot, and I made an exception for my grandmother's bacon. There was something sacred about that table.

My grandparents' house was the kind of place where people could return without judgment. After the elopement, after sobering up, after an accident that caused damage in the barnyard, there was still a place at the kitchen table for you. They accepted whatever people and gifts came to them, and they sent us back out in the world with sandwiches.

When I imagine the scene from this morning's Message for All Ages, I picture a long farmhouse table just like theirs.

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/toolbox/session1/sessionplan/stories/109416.shtml>

I imagine a room full of joys and sorrows, laughter and generosity. Heaven is the place where we learn to accept and encourage one another, where we learn to practice care with creativity. Heaven is where we learn to feed each other.

Our Universalist heritage teaches that all of us are welcomed by the Source of Love. No matter what our beliefs, culture, or learning experiences on earth, all souls are embraced by the Infinite. If there is a heaven, and we're all going to meet each other there, we're going to need to learn how to get along across the divisions that this world imposes. Eternity is a long time. Maybe we should start learning now.

In the story, heaven was marked by generosity and love. These things will sustain us as we live into our interdependence.

Generosity

Generosity would seem like an obvious ingredient to building the welcome table. The people in the story shared what was in front of them. It seems like everybody entered that dining hall with nothing, the food on the tables was able to get there because of something larger than themselves. Everyone was invited into that space empty-handed.

The way we share resources in this world need not depend on the illusion that some of us are completely independent and self-sufficient. Very few of us grow and process everything that we eat and drink. Not many of us are planting, harvesting, threshing, and grinding wheat into flour. Most of us at least need the help of the growers we meet at the Farmer's Market in order to put together a meal. And the growers need the cooperation of farm workers, market organizers, and whoever controls the weather.

Whatever we come by in this world, some gratitude is in order for the hands that helped bring it into being and for the people who helped prepare us to receive it. Out of that gratitude, let us hold things lightly, and continue to spread blessings out in ripples across the interdependent web. To put it more simply, it makes sense to say "thank you" and to share with others. Practice gratitude and generosity not simply because it's the polite thing to do, not exclusively when we perceive that we have things that others do not, but also in recognition of our interdependence.

We all came into this world empty-handed, and we'll all return to the Source of Love the same way. But sometimes our greatest gifts can't be held or touched. We have more

riches than can be counted. Universalism invites us to enjoy a sense of abundance and a practice of generosity, informed by the deep truth of interdependence.

Love

Love is the essence of Universalism. Divine love overcomes all obstacles and heals all wounds that divide us from the sacred and from ourselves. There's no eternal punishment, and therefore no need to save anyone from believing differently than we do, so we can focus our energies on working with the Divine to comfort the afflicted, bring release to the captive, and feed the hungry. These acts of care are expressions of love.

There is a danger in talking about love that I might be misunderstood to mean something limited to mental and emotional affection. I'm thinking in much more practical terms. Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker said it very well in her essay, "Love First" (printed in *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, p. 145-146):

"This interconnectedness of all things calls for wisdom and reverence. We cannot trample this landscape of life as ignorant fools and expect to remain safe. We cannot turn from our bonds and obligations for and with one another and expect everyone to be okay. We cannot love after the fact and expect love to be able to save life. Maybe in the end love will save us all, but it has a lot better chance at the beginning.

"We need to love from the start-- not as an emergency strategy when everything has gone wrong. We need to love our neighbors as ourselves through economic systems that pay a living wage for labor instead of indulging in policies that allow the rich to get richer and the poor to be left behind when the storm comes. We need to love the world through reverence that fosters observant attention to the intricate relationally of life....If we can learn to love first, not last, then love may save us."

Parker is talking about infusing reverent love for creation and for humans into our very way of being. She is talking about embodying that love in the way we set up society and in the way we pay attention to what's going on around us.

Consider the small scale. When I think about the logistics involved in making sure everyone in a family has what they need to cooperate and thrive on an average day, I realize that loving first instead of last is vital for any group of people of any size. If you share caring responsibilities for beings of any kind, you know what I'm talking about.

Planning ahead together to make sure the needs of the most vulnerable are met, building care and concern into the system, is tough. We do it because we love each other. We love first, throughout, and last.

That's the kind of love we want in our local communities, in our nation, and in our world. As Universalists, we believe in and practice loving our neighbor without exception. Whatever the fate of our planet, we are going to experience it together. Whatever may happen to our souls, our destinies are intertwined. Let us love first, so that we may return to the Source knowing we have set a table where we have learned to feed each other.

Conclusion

This morning's story imagines two scenarios in which people are bound together. When the people act with humor, generosity, and love, they create a community where all who are hungry may eat. I don't believe in an afterlife where we are punished for our mistakes or for our limited social skills.

I do believe that we can learn to feed each other in this life, all of us. I believe in a Divine love that infuses all things, that accepts all of us and will not let us go. I believe it is our job to respond to that love by establishing justice, practicing compassion, caring for our planet, and creating beauty.

May we go forth today with generosity, welcoming all without regard to obvious gifts, sharing what we can, and knowing that there is more abundance than meets the eye.

May we go forth today with love, approaching the planet and each other with reverence, infusing care for each other in all of our dreams and plans.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.