



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“What’s Left Over,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on November 25, 2012

I hope you had a nice Thanksgiving. It’s a lovely holiday, isn’t it--a chance to get together with family and friends, and enjoy delicious food, and have a couple of days apart from our regular routines and often busy lives. Thanksgiving draws us together for the purpose of counting our blessings and expressing our gratitude. It’s a ritual that feels good, and is for us.

Do you know the Norman Rockwell painting of a family around a Thanksgiving table, with a golden brown turkey at the center? That iconic image of Thanksgiving is titled “Freedom from Want.”<sup>1</sup> It illustrates one of four universal rights that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt articulated: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Fear and Freedom from Want. Back then, freedom from want did not mean people should get everything they desired-- it simply articulated the hope that one day everyone, here and around the world, would enjoy basic economic security.

Our country is blessed with abundant resources and we enjoy a standard of living most of world only dreams of. But there’s a shadow side to our prosperity, which is a tendency toward excess. I heard it observed that most of our problems in this country are problems of excess. Think about it--we are filling up our landfills with trash and the atmosphere with carbon dioxide; we are more overweight and spend more on the military and have greater debt than most any other country. Everything is big in America--one of my teachers called it “America on steroids.” The recession of the past few years could be changing this, but it’s just too soon to tell.

Our national aim does seem to be that we should want for nothing, and to have everything, doesn’t it? We’re told, many times a day, that more is better. At our Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, we probably had too many side dishes. Not that I complained. And this is really something for me to say this, we even had too many desserts. And of course, I had to sample each one! Just because I point out this tendency toward excess doesn’t mean I don’t participate in it.

I will say that I had no desire to go shopping on the day after Thanksgiving, or God forbid, on Thanksgiving night. Because what my body and soul wants after a day of feasting is, if not a day of fasting, than a quiet day of moderation.

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<sup>1</sup> You can see it online at <http://www.best-norman-rockwell-art.com/norman-rockwell-saturday-evening-post-article-1943-03-06-freedom-from-want.html>

You hear it said all the time, “The best part of Thanksgiving is the leftovers.” A plate of turkey and mashed potatoes and stuffing and gravy does somehow taste even better a day or two after Thanksgiving, doesn’t it?

We tend to think of what’s left over as somehow second-rate and less desirable. We seem to always be wanting what is new and shiny. But what if we turned our thinking around, and saw the beauty and value in what’s left over, in what endures? Aren’t the leftovers the essence of Thanksgiving? A wise and happy economy of using what you have, and enjoying it to the fullest?

We’re now in that intense time of the year, the (quote) “holiday shopping season.” Which implies that the way to celebrate holy days and the way to show people that we love them, is to buy things. Does this make sense to you?

I was driving out the Mass Pike years ago, listening to the radio, and I heard a story about the fleeting nature of life and of relationships. The person telling the story had lost his wife, and he reflected on the fact that eventually, all human relationships come to an end. He said this loss had taught him one thing: “Want what you have,” he said. I grabbed a scrap of paper and wrote that down. “Want what you have” means live in this moment, appreciate it for what it has to offer, don’t be running off to grab something else, something more, because if you pay attention to it, this moment probably offers just enough.

Today I want to take this idea of leftovers and apply it to our lives. After the years you’ve been on this earth, what’s left of your hopes and dreams? What endures in your heart and soul? It’s true, isn’t it, that over time, life winnows us down. We realize that we can’t do or be everything. We are forced to make choices, to let go of some things, so we can pursue other ones. And it is our choices that shape who we are.

At the end of his familiar passage about love, Paul names three things that abide--faith, hope and love. He’s speaking from his particular context about what lasts, about what is most important in human life--faith, hope and love. What about in your life? What is at the essence? What abides? When you get to the end of your life, what will be left over?

You know, don’t you, that Paul was not talking about romantic love. He used the Greek word *agape*, and the Greeks had different words for different kinds of love. *Eros* is romantic, physical love, *storge* is love among members of a family, and *philia* is friendship and affection. But *agape* is different than these. C.S. Lewis said *agape* is a selfless love, a love that is passionately committed to the well-being of the other.

This is what we are talking about when we say “Love is the doctrine of this church.” We’re not saying we get romantically involved with each other here, or even that we are like a big family. No, we’re saying our faith compels us to care as much for others as we do for ourselves, to even give things up so others can live too.

Do you see what a countercultural message this is? In a country and a season that says “Consume as much as you can,” and “Love is measured in things,” we try to follow a different way. We are part of a long faith tradition that, even with its faults and missteps, has got the essential things right. When Jesus was asked to name what was the greatest commandment in the law, he said “The first is, ‘You shall love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind and strength.’ The second is ‘You shall love you neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:30-31). Saying this, he affirmed what was the core teaching of Judaism and, later, Christianity: that we are here to put our trust in the Love which will never let us go, and, assured of that Love, to live a life of agape, loving not only for our own fulfillment, but living for and serving others.

Of course, none of us do this perfectly. We make mistakes, we hurt one another, but if we have love, then we seek forgiveness and reconciliation. We try again. This is how you build a relationship, a family, a community--not by being perfect or by always being right. One of my teachers in seminary talked about the significant ethical and theological difference between being right, and being in right relationship. Sometimes you have to choose between the two.

Our two spiritual direction groups, when they gather, have been saying aloud that blessing from John O'Donohue, that was our second reading today. I love the way it describes what we do in human relationship, as like building a house, creating a structure around us:

May the house we create together here today shelter us;  
May our hearts be tranquil here... may this be a safe place...  
a place of discovery... a house of courage and of welcome...  
Where we have eyes to see  
that no one arrives without a gift  
and no one leaves without a blessing.

I hope this is what happens here on Sunday morning, that we create this house of faith, hope and love. I sense that we do. I hope it also happens when we gather in smaller groups. And not just here; that you are building these hopeful, faithful, loving places in your lives.

We entering a time of the year full of unrealistic expectations and all kinds of pressure to do more and spend more, to reach for more and to get more. What if, in these days, you listened for, and heard, a different message? That you already have enough. That within you, and around you, there is enough love and care, enough wisdom and compassion. That you are good enough, that you already have what you need to be whole.

Can you trust that, in these days? Can you be at ease with your own life, with what you have and with who you are? Can you affirm that, when what is unessential and superfluous falls away, what is left over is good and even holy? That you have within you, as the Trappist monk Thomas Merton said, a “hidden wholeness”?

Can you touch that wholeness, and be acquainted with your own soul, with our own light and shadow? That's how to live fully and reverently and joyfully on this earth. And that's what I invite you to practice this week, and in this season--to seek ways to be grounded in the awe and

wonder and mystery of this life, to slow down and be in touch with what really matters, with what is good and true and essential. To know that is enough.

Maybe it's just because I'm an introvert, but I am happier to come in from raking leaves or a walk with one I love, and heat up some Thanksgiving leftovers and enjoy that simple feast, as I am to gather in a larger crowd with too many side dishes and even, too many desserts.

Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, whether your life right now is easy or hard, whether right now you are mostly happy or mostly sad, my hope and my prayer is that you will know you are beloved on this earth. That you can at least catch a glimpse of your own hidden wholeness. So you can trust that you have enough, that you already are enough.

In the coming days, with their temptation to want more and buy more and do more, will you make the time and space to feed your own soul? To listen for that quieter voice, that reminds you who you are and whose you are.

In these days, let remember that we are part of a great Love, and we are here to be bearers and sharers of that Love. That's why we're here.

Amen.