

Thanksgiving Reflection
Offered at the Grand Valley Interfaith Network's
Community Thanksgiving Service
November 26, 2013

Welcome. My name is Rev. Wendy Jones and I am honored to be up here speaking to you tonight representing the Unitarian Universalist congregation of the Grand Valley.

This Thanksgiving service is a yearly tradition in the Grand Valley. Once a year, we come together to worship. We come together tonight representing many different faith traditions, and yet here we are, connected. We are neighbors with one another, we are friends. Our children go to school together. We are a community. And tonight we are a community who has come together to worship.

We bring different traditions, we bring different songs, we bring different prayers, we even bring different Gods, or understanding of God. And yet here we are together, connected as a community.

As I was reflecting on what I would like to say tonight, one word kept coming back to me. The word "connection." We celebrate Thanksgiving as a way to remember and rejoice in the harvest and friendship that was formed between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe in 1621.

Today Thanksgiving has become more about a large dinner with family and friends. And yet, the tradition has lasted over 300 years. Why is that? I don't think it is only because of our memories of the pilgrims. I think that the tradition has lasted because of what it represents. It represents people overcoming extreme hardship and being connected to the land which they needed to stay alive. It represents the dependence on community, the need for one another to work together for survival and it represents the basic humanity and human connection that happened between two groups of people coming from completely different cultures and world paradigms.

Instead of war, the two groups came together to hunt, to sing to play. This is how we like to remember Thanksgiving. This is the story that is told to our first and second graders in school.

Over the years, we have learned that there is more to that history. That the story doesn't necessarily end there, or happily for the native people who extended their hands of friendship. However, on that day, at that point in time, we celebrate the coming together of two peoples in bonds of friendship.

What does this mean for us today? Why are we here tonight? What brings us together as a community of different faith traditions?

I contend that it is about connection. The need for human connection. The understanding that we are more than our religious affiliation or our political party. The recognition that we need one another, that we need to understand one another, and that we understand and recognize that as human beings we have so much more in common than our differences sometimes portray.

As my congregation is aware, I am approaching my one year anniversary of being diagnosed with cancer. When I look back on this year, the connections in the community are what I credit for the excellent care I have received in the Grand Valley. On the day that I was diagnosed my gynecologist got on the phone with the surgeon who got on the phone with the plastic surgeon who got on the phone with the oncologist.

They knew each other. They were in relationship with each other, and I benefitted from that sense of community within the Grand Valley medical system. It was a system based on human relationship and I believe that these relationships between the doctors in this community are saving lives.

As faith communities I believe that we need to be the same way. We need to know each other, so that when something happens to one of us, we will know who to call. We will have the foundation built on relationship to ask for help or to show up with support.

When I was in seminary, I did an internship with a small Church of the Brethren congregation in Littleton, CO. My mentor, the pastor at the little Prince of Peace church told me that we both needed to participate in the Littleton's citizen police academy. It was a six week course that the Littleton police department put on for the community basically taking us through a police academy 101. They showed us how they trained, they introduced us to their police dogs, they set up a fake crime scene and let us do finger printing, they invited us do "ride alongs" with them while they were on their patrols.

They had created this program because they understood the importance of outreach to the community. They realized that they needed to be in relationship with their citizenry.

While I found the entire academy fascinating, I didn't understand why my supervising minister, Sarah thought it was important for us to do. At the time I had no idea what participating in a citizen's police academy had to do with ministry.

And then, a few months later, on April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dlyan Klebold walked into Columbine High School and started shooting. In the midst of the chaos, Sarah went to the scene. She walked up to the police tape, and one of the officers yelled, "Sarah! Get over here! We need you!"

Sarah, had built a relationship with the police community. They knew her. They knew her value system, and they trusted her in a time of crisis. She had laid the foundation. She had prepared herself. She had built community in an unlikely area, and was therefore prepared to go where needed on a day of crisis.

For me, this is what it means for a community to come together. This is why these interfaith services are so important. This is why we need to know each other, to worship together; to take the time to really think about what matters to us; what is important to us.

For many of us this time of year is about connecting with family. I contend that the entire point of Thanksgiving was that two groups of people stepped outside of the familiarity and safety of family & tribe and expanded what that definition of community meant.

Even, if only for a certain moment in time at a specific point in history, two groups of strangers saw the humanity in one another and came together in peace.

I would like to say how thankful I am that we have the Grand Valley Interfaith Network here in Grand Junction. My invitation would be for us to individually and collectively take the time to strengthen our connections, to get to know one another so that when the time comes we have laid the foundation that will be required for us to come together as a community both in times of joy and celebration, or when we are in crisis and need of support.

Tonight, I am thankful that we are doing just that.

Thank you for being here.