

“Partakers of Our Plenty” or “That Guy at the End of the Table”  
November 20, 2022

John 6:25-35

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Norman Rockwell painted a well-known series titled “The Four Freedoms.” It was an attempt to put onto canvass the freedoms enumerated by Franklin Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union address.

You’ve probably seen them. The paintings illustrate “Freedom of Worship,” “Freedom of Speech,” “Freedom from Fear,” and “Freedom from Want.”

“Freedom from Want” addresses our American longing for plenty—so much so that Rockwell worried that it might suggest over-abundance rather than lack of want. The painting depicts a multigenerational Thanksgiving feast. Everyone is engaged in animated conversation. At one end of the table grandpa stands as grandma brings in the roast turkey—a gigantic bird for all those assembled. At the other end, one of the guests looks out and away from the table, as if to invite the viewer to take a seat and join this happy feast.

While Rockwell’s original depicts mid-twentieth century, White, middle America, much like Grant Wood’s “American Gothic,” “Freedom from Want” has been reimagined in many ways. One example is on this morning’s bulletin cover.

The original and the reimagined works combine Thanksgiving, freedom, and friendship. And they belong together.

Our words “freedom” and “friendship” both come from the same Sanskrit word—a word that means “dear” or “desired.” Freedom and friendship are two of our deepest longings.

*Freedom* speaks of our connections with other people as well as of our commitments to them. If we are to know “freedom from want,” it will not be through hoarding in isolation. We will find such freedom as we share in an open and welcoming community.

So, freedom and friendship are caught up with each other. Like that guy at the end of the table, freedom looks out and invites others to join in.

That guy at the end of the table was there at the place the indigenous Pokanoket people called Patuxet—and English colonists called Plymouth. In that place the Pilgrims encountered the friendship that makes freedom possible.

For thousands of years, around the world, people have celebrated and given thanks. Native Americans had their own days of thanksgiving.

Having come to the New World for religious freedom, with winter approaching, the Pilgrims did what all right-thinking Congregationalists would do. They proclaimed a day

of thanksgiving. They held a festival sometime between late September and early November in 1621.

In the only existing description of that thanksgiving harvest, Edward Winslow writes: “Our corn did prove well...Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor [William Bradford,] sent four men on fowling; that so we might, after a more special manner, rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labors....Many of the Indians [came] among us. And, amongst the rest, their greatest King, Massasoit, with some ninety men; whom for three days we entertained and feasted.”

What a great celebration! It was interracial, interfaith, international—a gathering of all types of people. In this beginning some of our best human impulses were shown. People did not think only of themselves and those like them. Freedom was bound together with friendship.

In writing about this festival to those in the Old World, Winslow concludes: “By the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

Do you hear the longing in those words—the deep desire to share? “We often wish *you* partakers of *our* plenty.” In freedom, in friendship, there is more than enough to go around.

The Pilgrim, and yes, the *Congregationalist*, understanding of abundance, of freedom from want, moves us to share what we have and who we are. And it allows us to receive what others offer and who they are. Our faith tells us that we are in bondage to our own plenty until we share with other people in the freedom that brings us together.

That guy at the end of the table was there in ancient Israel. Our ancient ancestors in faith knew the freedom that connects us with others.

The descendants of Abraham and Sarah, people of God’s promise, went to Egypt during a time of famine. They prospered there and were eventually enslaved. Moses arose as the leader who would take them out of slavery to a new land.

When the Hebrew people came out of slavery in Egypt, when they entered a new land that was filled with good things, they were told to remember their past and to give thanks to God.

“Wandering Arameans were my ancestors,” the Hebrews affirmed. “They went down into Egypt and lived there as aliens.”

Not all the people who followed Moses out of Egypt had this heritage. In becoming God’s people, however, they found a common bond reciting the history of those descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Indeed, in reciting that history, they *became* the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

They remembered the experience of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt—prosperity followed by slavery in a foreign land. They told again how God raised Moses and led them through a wilderness into their own land. All the people remembered this story together as though it was their own.

They claimed a common past. In doing so, they made a covenant with one another that enabled a common future.

As people of faith—this is our heritage as well. Ancestry, nationality, history may be different. Still, as we worship and give thanks, we recall the experience of the ancient Hebrews and claim it as our own. And in claiming that history, we are called to strengthen the bonds between ourselves and those who are different from us.

Remembering their history as slaves in Egypt, remembering the providence of God that liberated them and brought them into a land “flowing with milk and honey,” the people celebrated with a feast. This was not, however, a celebration of isolation.

The God who gave them freedom told them to “celebrate the bounty that God has given to you and to your house,” “together with the Levites”—that is, the religious leaders, as well as—and listen to this—“the aliens who reside among you.” Abundance leads to community, not insularity. Those “strangers”—they are as much a part of the celebration as those we know the best. In fact, the celebration is incomplete without them. This ancient Thanksgiving was also a feast of freedom, a celebration of friendship.

That guy at the end of the table was there in Plymouth, reaching out, inviting, welcoming the stranger.

That guy at the end of the table was there in ancient Israel.

And more and more, I think that guy at the end of the table starts to look like a contemporary follower of Christ—the man or woman reaching out, welcoming those whom society rejects, inviting diverse people to the feast of life.

We hear a lot lately from Christians who would exclude, judge, and restrict the rights of others. The heresy of White Christian Nationalism has raised its ugly little head. As Congregationalists, we keep coming back to scripture, we keep looking at our heritage and we keep finding a different approach to the Christian life that is true to the Christ whom we follow.

God calls us to look out and welcome people into the community where human longings are met. We welcome the stranger and open a new way of life together that seeks the good of all.

In friendship we will find the freedom we seek.

In freedom we will discover new friendships.

That guy at the end of the table continues to show up at our feasts when we are living at our faithful best. Women and men recognize that Thanksgiving in freedom draws us into friendship. Thanksgiving pulls us into a wider community.

So, Thanksgiving is not simply an opportunity to take stock of *what we have*—or even to be grateful for it. Thanksgiving gives us the chance to take stock of *who we are*—as individuals and as a community.

I'm convinced that there's something in all of this that is important not only for our close relationships but also for what's happening in the world. If freedom is to endure in Ukraine, if freedom is to be known in places where tyrants and despots continue to seek to repress the human spirit, it will involve us in new, and as yet unknown, deep friendships. I don't know how we'll get to that place, or what it will look like, but what if we started moving in the direction of friendship?

What happens when we start to look at the world not as distant strangers but as friends who share a similar desire for freedom?

New promised lands call us to step out in faith

We begin as we celebrate Thanksgiving, free from want, ready to make new friends who will be partakers of our plenty.