

“A Thanksgiving Tribute”

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Scripture: Exodus 16:11-18; Luke 9:10-17

Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

Southbury, CT

We gather in joy and fellowship in this warm and welcoming sanctuary in this beautiful little corner in God’s grand world. In gratitude, it’s good that we remember and thank those who have gone before us. This evening, I’d like to pay tribute to some of the people who have made our Thanksgiving celebrations what they are today.

I’m a minister at the South Britain Congregational Church, so I might naturally talk about the pilgrims and native Americans who sat down to the first Thanksgiving feast in 1621. Their perseverance is indeed one of the reasons we are here today. However, I understand that Rev. Dr. Craig McClellan delivered a definitive first-person account of that story complete with pilgrim costume at this service a year or two ago. Plus, the most prominent Puritan woman during that time was Anne Hutchinson, and she was banished to Rhode Island, so I thought I’d take a different tack.

I have some other folks in mind for our tribute today. These are some of the people whom we should thank for making our Thanksgiving what it is.

This evening, let’s pay tribute to Dorcas B. Reilly, the creator of the famous green bean casserole—the one with Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup and fried onions on top. She was head of the Campbell’s test kitchen for many years. The recipe card from 1955 is now in the National Inventors’ Hall of Fame in Akron, OH. She credits the fried onions for the casserole’s iconic status. “If it had been just beans and soup, it would have been flat and colorless,” she said. The onions elevated the dish “into another category.”ⁱ

And, as we count our blessings, let’s give thanks for Mr. Pearle B. Wait. In 1897, he bought a patent for powdered gelatin, added fruit flavors, and named his creation “Jell-O.” It took others to bring Jell-O to market and wiggling onto America’s tables, but the Jell-O mold might never have been adored without Wait and his wife, May.ⁱⁱ

(My grandmother’s holiday Jell-o salad recipe included these ingredients: cherry jello, Bing cherries, walnuts, cream cheese, and Coca-Cola. This Thanksgiving, as every year, I will miss my grandmother. I will not miss her Jell-o salad.)

We can thank the Intercollegiate Football Association and the National Football League for Thanksgiving Day football games. In its inaugural season in 1920, the NFL’s Akron Pros

defeated the Canton Bulldogs 7-0 on Turkey Day. The game featured Jim Thorpe, the star athlete who grew up in the Sac and Fox Native American nation, as well as Fritz Pollard, the league's first African-American quarterback.

On Thursday, as we push our chairs back from the table with visions of naps dancing in our heads, let us not forget to thank Frederick Gowland Hopkins, the Nobel Prize winning scientist who discovered the amino acid tryptophan and demonstrated that tryptophan needs to be supplied by the diet.ⁱⁱⁱ We give thanks that we will be well supplied with tryptophan again this year.

Thanksgiving is a national holiday; for that we should Sarah J. Hale. From 1836 to 1877, she was the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, one of the most influential magazines in the country. Mrs. Hale advocated tirelessly for women's education; she wrote popular children's verses such as *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. She also badgered presidents and other public officials for 36 years to make Thanksgiving a national observance; it was she who suggested turkey as the nation's main course.

*Sarah Hale had a thought
She would not let it die
Turkey day and holiday
And we eat pumpkin pie.*

Finally, in 1863, Abraham Lincoln gave in and declared Thanksgiving a holiday across these United States. He saw it as a way to bring the divided nation together.

A divided nation we remain, in many ways, seven score and seven years later. When we're discouraged and complaining about our leaders and feel like we're wandering in the wilderness, we can be grateful for the Exodus account from the Hebrew Bible of people a long, long time ago who felt much the same way. They grumbled and griped about Moses and Aaron; they longed for the good old days—at least in Egypt, there was meat!

God provided. God provided quail and manna—perhaps the earliest forerunners of turkey and stuffing. *“Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.”*

That was the secret, really: *“They gathered as much as each of them needed”* – and for a single day's needs only. God has given us enough to provide for all of God's children, if we each take only what we need. Let us be mindful of that here in this resource-rich country where many people still go hungry. Let us be mindful of that in a world where over 30,000 people will die of starvation today.

When I hear statistics like that, I am overwhelmed. I am grateful, too, for the New Testament passage from the Gospel of Luke, the feeding of the 5,000 (really more, since only men were

counted). I understand the disciples' desire to distance themselves from the needy crowds and the disciples' sense of helplessness and inadequacy. And yet, Jesus insists: *"You give them something to eat."*

Even when we know that we offer much too little to meet the needs of the world, our hands, our resources, and our faith are required. When we share what we do have, God's abundance becomes manifest: *"And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces."*

Grateful to God and to those in the past who have given us Thanksgiving, may we also give thanks for the present moment. In these years—and, frankly all years on this earth—when religious diversity seems to equal divisiveness, I'm grateful for this gathering, for this evening of peace and goodwill. It represents a force for good, people for God.

For so long, the voices of division have shouted so loudly that the voices of tolerance are harder to hear. For so long, it can feel like we've been wandering in a wilderness of inequality, despair, and hate.

But we know that's not the whole story—not the real story. The real story is that God is here, and we are here with one another. Grounded in God, let us say to the world that we believe in belief, that faith works, that we love God and one another, and that love is stronger than fear.

With gratitude for those who have gone before, with hope for all that is to come, I wish you a happy Thanksgiving. Stand up for hope and love. And enjoy that bean casserole. Amen.

ⁱ www.2.tbo.com

ⁱⁱ www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jell-O

ⁱⁱⁱ www.discoveriesinmedicine.com