

**WELCOME TO THIS FRIENDLY CHURCH**  
**November 21, 2010**

**Our mission, as we live our historic, liberal faith, is to nurture spiritual growth, honor diversity, and offer service with love”**

**PRELUDE(s) Heather**

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**REMEMBER TO MENTION THE PETITION**

**OPENING WORDS**

**Our opening words are taken from Howard Thurman’s “A Sacrament of Thanksgiving”:**

**Today I make my Sacrament of Thanksgiving. I begin with the simple things of my days;**

**Fresh air to breathe,  
Cool water to drink,  
The taste of food,  
The protection of houses and clothes,  
The comforts of home. ...**

**I bring to mind all the warmth of humankind that I have known:**

**My mother’s arms, ...  
The playmates of my childhood,  
The wonderful stories brought to me from the many who talked of  
days gone by when fairies and giants and all kinds of magic held  
sway;  
The fears I have shed, the tears I have seen;  
The excitement of laughter and the twinkle in the eye with its  
reminder that life is good. ...**

**I finger one by one the messages of hope that awaited me at the crossroads;  
The smiles of approval from those who held in their hands the reins of my  
security;**

**The tightening of the grip in a single handshake when I feared the step  
before me in the darkness;**



## **ANTHEM Heather and the Choir**

### **SPOKEN and SILENT PRAYER, MEDITATION, REFLECTION**

**The moon**

**Which once upon a time was named Selena,  
Rode, almost entirely full, high in the cold sky  
The other night. Perhaps you saw her.  
There were long plumes of cloud dividing up  
The deep blue of the heavens into quiet pools  
Of crystal clear darkness in each of which a few bright stars swam.  
It was the kind of night that made one thankful for  
The seeing of it, the presence of it, its distant nearness  
To stand on the surface of our earth and notice,  
Even if only now and again, how wondrous are our surroundings,  
How beautiful their every natural part no matter where we stand  
Is to be grateful, is to know that however hard other aspects of our lives  
May be, there is a heaven overhead visible from wherever, and however, We  
are, and a garden of infinite raptures beneath our feet that we can bend  
and touch and know we are touching a source of life itself.  
We gather once a year to give thanks for the harvest in its season.  
Yet not even once in a year do we come together to give thanks for  
The world itself, on which we work and play, love and live, plant and Grow  
and bring up the human young with gifts and blessings behind and Before  
and all around us. It is right and proper to give thanks for the gifts  
Which bless us on our tables and in our storehouses. But it is also meet  
To see the blessings of the earth, the water and the air which in their beauty  
and their intimations of spirit which make us glad with the Noticing of  
them. Open us to recall, in our silent meditations, reflections and prayers,  
the winds as they rustle through the falling leaves and drying grasses, the  
sunlight as it glistens on flowing waters and the ice-skimmed pools and  
puddles, the scent of wood smoke in the village and the farmyard air, the  
touch of cold that wakes us to a keener appreciation of The senses, and the  
fullness of our hearts and minds when we open them in giving praise for all  
the miracles of life with which we have been gifted.**

## SILENCE

**So it is. So may it always be. Blessed be. Amen.**

## CHORAL RESPONSE

**From you I receive, to you I give,  
Together we share, and from this we live.**

**READING (s)**                      from “Five Grains of Corn”                      by Daniel Higgins

On November 11, 1620, two days after the Mayflower had landed on Cape Cod, the Pilgrims drew up an historic document: The Mayflower Compact. That instrument set forth the rules of living together. It was the first in a long line of documents that set the style and the pattern for civil government [on the English, and later the American portion] of North America.

A year later, after surviving their first bleak winter, conditions had improved sufficiently to warrant a festival to give thanks to God for his providence and care. ... Though Jamestown, which was settled in 1607 was the first permanent colony, it was Plymouth that set the tone for the national holiday of Thanksgiving. There is something distinct in this celebration. There is nothing [quite] like it elsewhere in the world. It celebrated neither a great battle nor the fall of an empire. ...

At that first Thanksgiving in the fall of 1621, a custom was established which was carried out for many years in early New England. Five grains of corn were placed at every plate as a reminder of those stern days of that first winter when the Pilgrim’s food was so depleted that the daily ration for each individual was five grains of corn.

Perhaps we, who have [largely] forgotten the power of symbols, **need to return to the tradition of placing grains of corn at our plates as we eat our Thanksgiving meal.**

**I want to share with you what I will choose to have those five grains symbolize for me. One of them – I’m not necessarily listing them in order of importance – I want to serve as a reminder of a religious community that has a tradition of freedom and tolerance. It is an inclusive heritage. ... The agent, the institution, that has held in tension the differing strands of a**

shared history, that has attempted to make sense out of diverse systems of thought, that has sought to transcend particularism and find meaning in universals, is this church. I am grateful for the aid it has given me to find an appropriate meaning. ...

Another grain I want to represent is my family and to affirm the validity of family life, where each member is valued, where in day-to-day relationships we experience love, where we find support and understanding, where dreams can be dreamed, where hurts can be healed, where joy can be celebrated. The small grain of corn will symbolize for me largeness of heart to be found in caring families.

I choose the third grain to represent the people I have known and been known by in the course of my life, both those I liked and those I didn't – but from whom I learned. ...

I choose another grain to represent thanks for this country. This is not to say that I affirm with Stephen Decatur, “our country, right or wrong.” I find my feelings expressed better by Charles Churchill, when he spoke of England, “with all her faults she is my country still.” All is not right in this nation, but neither is it all wrong.

The last grain of corn represents neither an act of remembrance nor a litany of thanksgiving. It is difficult to know what to label it. I want it to serve as a prayer, that amid the inevitable ugliness and tragedy of life, there will be also the dimension of beauty and hope.” [Close quote.]

Like Dan Higgins, each of us is free to choose what each grain of corn would best symbolize for us. If we do indeed take at least one leaf from the Pilgrim book, what do we want to remember? For what are we thankful?”

**SERMON** “Symbols of Pain, Grief, and Thanks”    **Mr. Beal**

**Dan Higgins was the minister of the First Parish Church in Malden, Massachusetts, one of the few First Parish churches to become Universalist. I worked there as an intern while I was at Divinity School and was at church when he delivered the sermon from which I excerpted this morning’s reading. I’d never heard of putting five grains of corn beside the plate for the Thanksgiving meal. The only symbols I remember from my family’s table were small candles looking like Mr. and Mrs. Pilgrim and turkeys on the paper napkins.**

**But I liked the idea and have tried to encourage it in the churches I’ve served. Back in the 70s, when I was at the Divinity School, I knew only vaguely about King Phillip’s War, which is what the Puritans, and to a lesser extent, the Pilgrims, chose to call the rebellion of the Native American tribes in Southern New England against the wholesale stealing of their land by the ever larger waves of immigrants flooding into the Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay ... primarily from England. It was a bloody conflict on both sides, but resulted in the lands the English wanted being almost entirely depopulated of indigenous peoples.**

**My picture of the Pilgrims had been based on what I think was the photograph of a painting in my third or fourth grade history book. It showed a small party of Pilgrims in the woods, walking through the snow. Presumably to church. They were comfortably dressed in the way we came to think of Pilgrims dressing and though one or two of the men carried**

**guns the scene was peaceful enough. I accepted the stories I now know were largely untrue, about this small band of religious independents crossing the cold North Atlantic in search of freedom of worship. Most of us know that this was not the case, and the Pilgrims and, again, especially the Puritans, established a theocracy as demanding of conformity to their ideas of religion as anything they had faced in England.**

**Anne Hutchinson died in exile, having been banished from Massachusetts Bay for having heard God telling her to spread an understanding of the gospel quite different from what the ministers were preaching (not the least of her heresy being that a woman could receive a revelation). Later, in Salem, the witchcraft trials were other examples of the authority of the leaders of a government supported church over any who challenged – or they thought challenged – their power over those, in Salem as in Boston, especially women, who thought or acted in ways other than the received wisdom.**

**Today, as I've mentioned before, the First Church in Boston, the First Parishes in Plymouth and Cambridge, Dorchester and Salem, along with many of the churches founded by the Pilgrims and the Puritans, are now Unitarian Universalist churches, which have fought for the freedom to worship according to one's own lights and for the separation of church and state so that no faith can command the power or the resources that in a democracy belong to all.**

**Times have changed continuously since 1621. Thank heavens. And the grains of corn can be symbols of an expanded and a changed reality.**

**They stood once for deliverance from a winter harsher than the Pilgrims had ever known in England and for which they were almost entirely unprepared. Over half of them died that first winter and when rations were reduced to five grains of corn there were only seven of the Pilgrims, sick though they were themselves, who had the strength to feed and nurse the survivors.**

**That was a reality I believe we should not forget. Nor should we allow the idea of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags as, at least initially, friends and allies to perish. The records of the Plymouth Colony are steadfast in acknowledging that without the aid of the Wampanoags and their Sachem, or Massasoit, the Colony would have probably not survived.**

**These Native Americans, properly suspicious though they were because of some previous contact with Englishmen, in fact welcomed the Pilgrims and taught them enough about surviving in the wilderness that a feast of Thanksgiving in 1621 was possible. The grains of corn are symbols not just of the rations the Pilgrims were reduced to, but of the seed corn they learned to plant and harvest. They can also be painful symbols of the terrible payment the Wampanoags received for their kindnesses.**

**There is another kind of thanks possible at all times of the year, but which can be lifted upon Thanksgiving as well. This is the possibility of being thankful that no matter the pain and suffering that surround us, the hunger, the homelessness, the illnesses for which people don't have the money to buy treatments and medications, the many kinds of losses about which people grieve ... losses from death, losses from separation, losses from estrangement ... we can if we will choose to be thankful that in almost every**

situation there is at least something we can do to be helpful, some contribution we can make, directly or indirectly, to deal with the pain and grief we ourselves and others suffer. Likewise, as in the case of our past and continuing mistreatment, in some places genocidal mistreatment, of the original inhabitants of what is now “our” country, while things that took place in the past ... hundreds of years or twenty years ago, nothing ever takes place without subsequent results and effects that can still be discerned and still be addressed. It’s possible at all times and seasons of the year and perhaps particularly at Thanksgiving to give thanks that the possibilities for peacemaking, reconciliation and restitution never fade entirely away, and with the passage of the years become increasingly matters of glad-making opportunity rather than grim obligation.

For me personally, all of these are now the reasons I still place the corn beside my plate, as well as the fact that the grains can be symbols of an approach to growing things, to an agriculture and an understanding of food as a tie to a way of life, evident in the way we cook and eat that’s not only healthier but more real and more sustainable and more linked to what is still local.

I go every Tuesday morning now to the back room of Hannaford’s to pick up for the Community Lunch Program – that we offer space for downstairs in the kitchen and the Concert Hall, and have furnished and still do people like Lee Millet and Barbara Howard, the Gillinghams and Chris Davis and many more volunteers– I go just to pick up the leftover fruits and vegetables, and especially the breads and pastries, that the supermarket would otherwise throw away. And there’s an incredible

amount of it, especially of bakery items that, if not consumed by the folks who come for lunch and take home with them to supplement what they can eke out from their budget for food, goes to waste. I'm pleased to see that these items are used to meet human needs as well as becoming fodder for pigs, but am dismayed at the quality of the food which is loaded with sugar and salt and the kinds of chemicals the food industry loads into the products it advertises and decorates and sells to us.

I am probably almost as guilty as the next shopper, buying junk I know is not very good for me because I'm used to having my predilections for salts and sugars tweaked every time I watch the television or enter the supermarkets. The five grains of corn, besides the good and not at all good history of the settlement of the county, reminds me, symbolizes for me, a much harder but much more natural way of eating and being that was once customary but is still available to us if we discipline ourselves to take advantage of the products of the natural world we have so ready to hand to us here in this relatively unspoiled countryside.

There are many things to be reminded of and to be thankful for of which the little grains of corn can help us be aware. I invite you take five grains and slip them into your pocket and come Thursday welcome both the corn and a Guest At Your Table wherever you choose and for whatever choose to give your thanks.

**HYMN**

Give Thanks

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**CLOSING WORDS**

**PARTING CIRCLE**

*“Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.”*

# POSTLUDE(s)

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