

Interfaith Thanksgiving Service
The Presbyterian Church of Bordentown, NJ
November 21, 2007
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Marge Piercy, one of my favorite poets, writes in the last verse of her poem *The Book of Ruth and Naomi*:

At the season of first fruits we recall
those travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers
making do with leftovers and mill ends,
whose friendship was stronger than fear,
stronger than hunger, who walked together
the road of shards, hands joined.

The “season of first fruits” that the poem describes refers to the Jewish holiday of *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks. Forty-nine days after Passover, *Shavuot* usually occurs in late May or early June. This is when Jews traditionally read from The Book of Ruth, the rabbis picking up the theme of Harvest and connecting that to the time when we bring in our first fruits.

For Americans, Thanksgiving is the holiday to remember the story of Ruth. During Thanksgiving, we celebrate the plenty of the harvest and what can happen when peoples of different faiths and cultures, put down their weapons and their hostility, and come together to have a meal. The Europeans and the Native Americans that broke bread together some four hundred years ago, had different languages and different traditions, they had grown up thousands of miles apart at a time when that was an

inconceivable distance, and yet for one night in one year they were brothers and sisters.

So too, the story of Naomi and Ruth, a Jew and a Moabite, sworn enemies who often were pitted against each other in Biblical times, found solace in each other's arms.

The power of the Story of Ruth is contained in one line that we read tonight:

“Your people will be my people, and your God my God.” At a time when conversion was unheard of, to cross that divide on your own, by your choice, to enter into enemy territory was all but unthinkable. For her efforts, Ruth is rewarded mightily, becoming the grandmother to David and, side by side, with Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, a heroine for all time. She teaches us that we can overcome our differences and that if we are brave enough to walk into that divide, we can transform the world. For the Native Americans who offered their hospitality to the travelers from overseas and to Ruth and Naomi who took a chance on friendship and love, we must be forever grateful. More than the bounty of the harvest and as Marge Piercy writes “stronger than fear, stronger than hunger,” on Thanksgiving we celebrate the gift of being together with family and community.

This is my fifth year in Bordentown and my fifth Interfaith Thanksgiving service. For me, as I do not live locally, but travel here from Philadelphia, this is one of my few opportunities to really see the our city outside of 58 Crosswicks, where Temple B'nai Abraham is located. I love being able to visit and worship in so many different settings,

every year bringing a new location and another chance to bond with my fellow clergymen and women. So far I've seen Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians and, now, Presbyterians. Each with a slightly different flavor of service and spiritual life. My greatest challenge has been keeping up with your singing. If only our synagogue could be a bit larger, so that we could invite you in as well.

Bordentown has taught me so much working with my Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters. When I came here for the first time in the summer of 2003, I had just come back from a conference at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, where seminarians from all different backgrounds got together to study Interfaith Dialog. Over the course of a week, we heard lectures, studied together and just talked, sometimes until late at night. We imagined what it would be like if we spent more time looking at our similarities than at our differences. And, we were given a mission: “to go out into your community and begin to dialog.”

Naturally, the first place I explored after arriving was the church across the street from the synagogue, St. Marys. And, what a big church it was. I remember just trying to find the right door to walk in was challenging. I looked inside and was overwhelmed by the size and the grandeur. I wanted very much to meet the Priest, but did not even know where to begin. As an outsider to Bordentown and a newcomer to the community, I knew that I had a long way to go.

But, slowly and surely, I began to make inroads. First, at the Thanksgiving

service, where I met many of the clergy and felt so welcomed in. They even told me about their Ministerium group that meets every Tuesday at the Town and Country Diner. And, I found out about the Pulpit exchange in the Spring.

As luck would have it, for the pulpit exchange I was assigned to a church outside of Bordentown proper, The United Methodist Church of Crosswicks. I spoke with its pastor, Rev. Morrison, and was told, not only, would I have to preach at one service, but two. I remember how lost I got just trying to meet Rev. Morrison at the Town and Country so that he could lead me to Ellisdale. I kept missing the turn off on Ward Avenue, and not being from New Jersey, didn't even know how to make a proper U-Turn. I'm embarrassed to say I ended up with a ticket because I couldn't figure out the jug handles.

But, finally I made it to the diner and John took care of the rest.

In the years since then, he and I have participated in so many interfaith events it is difficult to name them all. We studied psalms together (in Hebrew!!!), we've attended rallies, we've started an Interfaith Dialog group, now in its 3rd year, we've eaten French Toast together at the Town and Country, and, John, would even claim credit for bringing me together with my wife (our second date was to his 50th birthday party at the Ellisdale Church).

Most important, by far, however, has been our work with the hungry in the

Bordentown area. Unbeknownst to me at the time and, perhaps to many of you now, in the motels surrounding Bordentown proper are scores of individuals and families who do not know where their next meal will come. At a time of crisis when social service organizations were struggling to make ends meet and had lost the ability to provide meals on a consistent basis, we knew that that something needed to be done. The only problem was that my synagogue was too small in both physical size and membership to make meals on our own and Rev. Morrison's church was too far away from the motels to be able to transport meals on a regular basis. And, so we forged a partnership, John's community would prepare the meals and my community, along with members of a Unitarian Church, would bring them to the motels.

While only once a month, this program has been a Godsend for our community. How wonderful it is to come with a troop of impressionable teenagers to John's church and see fifty or sixty containers waiting to be delivered. The smell of hot dogs and chicken filling the room and later our cars. Small packages of drinks and deserts, as well as plastic ware, sit on the tables of his church, all arranged and counted. This is not something that either of us could have done alone, but together, we've made a difference for hundreds of families. And, the looks on the 4 and 5 year olds faces and that on their mothers when they receive these packages is heavenly. I only wish, John and his amazing lay volunteers, his hidden elves, could experience them side by side with us.

This partnership has led to other partnerships. At around the same time, a group

from all the area churches met to discuss other strategies for providing food to the hungry. Led by Rev. Rambo and Anna Kettner at First Baptist we came up with the idea of putting together shopping bags of food with contributions from churches and synagogues. From granola bars to pb&j, cereal to pasta, every month we supply 25 packages out to families in need. And, other groups have delivered their own meals every month.

Here is just a short anecdote from an e-mail Anne sent out to the group:

Thu, 14 Dec 2006

Last month's grocery delivery and meal (for us) fell on the Monday after Thanksgiving. To make it a little special, we had made stuffing and some home-made pies (my first sweet potato pies ever). It was late in the month, and the folks were even more appreciative than usual. In one room, one of us handed the grocery bag to (what appeared to be) a father and his two teenage daughters. As I left, I could see one of the daughter actually jumping with joy at the sight of all that was in the bag. In this day and age, when teenage girl smiles are rare to begin with, it was priceless. A teenage girl in a motel jumping for joy - priceless. Thanks to all!!--Anne

From crisis came opportunity. It showed the resilience of our community. Our ability to think outside of the box and to work together on an important cause. We are a community with limited resources, however by helping each other out we could make a difference. This is the essence of Interfaith Dialog: knowing that, in the end, we need each other.

For Ruth and Naomi, for the Native Americans and the Europeans, coming together at a time of desperation, was less of a choice than a necessity. True Ruth, like her sister Orpah, could have gone back home, and true the Native Americans could have led the Europeans starve in their backyard, but hope and faith, if given energy, will always overcome fear and anger.

Sadly, however, as much as we would like to ignore it, both the story of Ruth and the story of Thanksgiving have terrible conclusions. In Ruth's case, her willingness to cross national and religious barriers does not lead to peace between the Israelites and the Moabites. In fact, just the opposite is true. For her offspring eventual is the one to subdue the Moabite people.

As is written in the Second Book of Samuel, Chapter 8, about her grandson David: “And he defeated Moab, and measured them with a line, making them lie down in the ground; with two lines he measured to put to death, and with one full line to keep alive. And so the Moabites became David’s servants, and brought tribute.”

Likewise, it is not a mystery what became of the partnership between European settlers and the Native Americans. Even as we celebrate this partnership today, our kids still play “Cowboys and Indians” at home, and the blood of so many dead covers our land.

So, what can we do? How can we overcome such terrible history? We do so, as we do today, by celebrating the good, holding up the possible. As we make our Thanksgiving offering today, let us do so in the name of peace. May each of us in, our own way, come up with ways to creatively work together. May each of us in our own way, put aside our instinct to insult and to condemn the other. Let us instead realize how when we come together like we do on Thanksgiving all of us are the better for it. That means learning about the other and caring about the other. This means treating each other and everyone with respect, and like we too would want to be treated.

As we learned in our very first Interfaith Dialog, versions of the Golden Rule exist in almost every human culture. Here are just a sampling of a few ways it appears:

- Christianity: "So in everything, do to others, what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets" -- New Testament: MT 7:12 NIV
- Buddhism: Treat not others in ways that yourself would find hurtful.-- Udana-Varga 5.18
- Baha'i: Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself. -- Baha'u'llah Gleanings
- Confucianism: One word which sums up the basis for all good conduct...loving kindness. Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself. -- Confucius Analects 15:23
- Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.-- Mahabharata 5:1517
- Islam: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. -- The Prophet Mohammed, Hadith
- Judaism: What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole torah; all the rest is commentary.-- Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat 31a
- Native Spirituality: We are as much alive as we keep the earth alive.-- Chief Dan George
- Jainism: One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.-- Mahavira, Sutratvanga

- Sikhism: I am no stranger to no one; an no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all. -- Guru Granth Sahib, pg.1299
 - Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbors loss as your own loss. -- T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-218
 - Unitarianism: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent of all existence of which we are a part.-- Unitarian principle
 - Zoroastrianism: Do not unto others what is injurious to yourself. -- Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29
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If only we could live fully by these rules. If only we could find the other in ourselves.

May you have a Thanksgiving of plenty and blessing. May you give as well as you receive. And, may God be gracious to us and grant us peace.