

Thanksgiving Sermon
11.20.17
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, Norwalk City Hall

Friends, fellow faith leaders, Mayor Rilling, Senator Duff—good evening, and Happy Thanksgiving.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to sit together with this community on this evening, just a few days before Thanksgiving. I am grateful for the chance to express prayer in several languages, to learn from different religious traditions, and still to pray in one voice. I would be grateful for this opportunity on any day, in any year, but I have to say, it feels quite special--and truly a necessity--right now.

I imagine I'm not the only one here this evening who has had a tough year. I'm not interested in getting political--this is not the venue for that specific conversation; no, I'm talking about the feeling of being an American and reacting to difficult, troubling events in our country--events I would have thought impossible.

In just this last year alone, our country has born the pain of more mass shootings, including Las Vegas and, most recently, in Sutherland Springs, TX--in a house of worship, just like our own. For us as Connecticut residents, the trauma and pain of Newtown is awakened each time we hear of more loss of life. We have born witness to the threatening march-turned-violent in Charlottesville, VA. And, like so many communities around the country, members of our own community of Norwalk have been threatened with deportation; thank God they are all still here, thanks to the good work of faith communities and attorneys.

And that's not even to mention the natural disasters that plague communities across our country year after year--like in Houston, Florida, Puerto Rico, and every community in the west suffering from wildfires.

Yes, it's been tough. For me, the hardest part is grappling with the truth that the individuals who have carried out such outrageous acts are Americans, just like you and me. I haven't quite resolved that one; it's just an unsettling reality.

It is precisely because of this hurt that we've all been carrying around that the theme of this evening is Love & Hope.

Our readings this evening have raised up aspects of our various traditions that speak to loving one another. In this season of Thanksgiving and gratitude, love and respect for one another must play a central role in our lives. In this year that has included so much pain, we must commit not to pile on the hate, but to love and to seek to understand. Now is the time to pay ever so close attention to the words that come out of our mouths, the jokes we make without thinking and those we chuckle at. The next generation--our own children and those around us--are watching and learning at every turn.

We need only look a little to the north, to our neighbors in Wilton, for fresh and painful instances of discrimination in the religious realm--first, damage done on several occasions to the Hindu Mandir, and more recently, anti-Semitic graffiti in the middle school. No doubt, some of us here tonight have experienced bias based on our faith here in Norwalk, whether it made the headlines or was suffered in private. We live now in a social climate where those with hate in their hearts feel emboldened. We know--and the truth is, they also know--that our country prides itself on being a haven for individuals of all races, religions, and ethnicities, not to mention interests, professions, loving partnerships, or abilities. As people of faith, we are charged with walking a different path--a path of love, a path of optimism, a path of hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Look around this room--THIS is America. We are individuals who fit into all sorts of different categories, and we are here together, embracing one another both because of what we share *and* because of our differences. This gathering, and so many others like it this week across our country--THIS is the balm that begins to heal the pain.

And that doesn't mean that we just carry ourselves above conflict or disagreement. That would simply be naive, and it might prevent us from making true progress in our world.

I'd like to share one more tidbit from Jewish tradition that illustrates the inherent value in disagreement. Remember the 2 rabbis in the texts from earlier--Hillel and Shammai? Turns out, they disagreed about everything. Each had a school and a group of students, and they couldn't see eye-to-eye on anything. Jewish tradition pits the 2 of these rabbis against each other many times, and in all but 6 cases, the law is established according to the opinion of Hillel. But it's not because he's right. No, that would just be too easy. The law is established according to Hillel's opinion because of the way in which they related to one another. Shammai and his students were strict with the law, and they stuck fast to their opinions. Hillel and his students, on the other hand, would ALWAYS reference the opinion of Shammai and his students before expressing their own thoughts. And it's because of this openness to hearing someone else's point of view--to appreciating it, even while disagreeing with it!--that the law follows Hillel.

These texts were written down 2000 years ago, but boy, do they resonate today. Each human being in this world has a history, a motivation, and an opinion. It might be different than our own. It probably is. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't and can't speak to one another. We just have to work a little harder to remove the layers of difference, of misunderstanding, to find our core commonality.

In just a few days, we will sit around the Thanksgiving table. We will spend a few precious hours with people we love, hopefully with good food, and with a swell of gratitude for everything we have. This year, rather than look at Thanksgiving as a haven from the rest of our lives, let us be inspired by the love and the gratitude around that table and carry it with us into every part of our lives. May each of us be blessed to have a wonderful holiday, and may we be blessed to seek out the divine spark that lives within each and every human being.