

Better Than Picture Perfect

Not every Thanksgiving meal is as glowingly harmonious as that old Norman Rockwell painting. We don't all sit around a formally set dining table, kids and guests all primly dressed, smiling and joyfully eager as grandma carries an enormous platter with a perfectly roasted Tom Turkey to the table and grandpa stands ready to carve. The image is as endearing as it is intimidating. How many can live up to that image? The messiness of modern life has reduced the Rockwell images to mawkish nostalgia. Indeed, so many artists and wisecracks have poked fun of his buffed and fluffed Americana fantasies that even the cynical renderings have become cliché.

No, Thanksgiving isn't about living up to someone's fantasy. And Thanksgiving certainly isn't about a meal. It isn't about a day of stuffing our faces and watching over-hyped football. Rather, Thanksgiving is a day for us to acknowledge the freedoms and blessings that we all too often take for granted. It is a time for us to acknowledge that our country is a multi-colored, multi-cultured, multi-faith tapestry that is strong and glorious because of its diversity.

Note that each of our patriarchs held interfaith services. Abraham held an interfaith service with Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Genesis 14). They came together to celebrate their victory over marauding foes and prayed for peace. Isaac and Abimelekh, King of the Philistines, had an interfaith feast celebrating their agreement to respectfully share the land (Genesis 26). And in this week's Torah portion, Vayitzei, Jacob and his father-in-law Laban had a feast celebrating the end of their family feud (Genesis 31). They role-modeled the importance of interfaith relations and creating bonds of cooperation.

This week, I met with leaders of local churches and we formed the Hampden Interfaith Partnership. Together, we'll form alliances for social action projects that will serve the underserved. We'll put together study groups to bring our community together for intellectual and spiritual inspiration. And we'll have programs throughout the year to build bridges of friendship, respect and cooperation. By definition, the descriptions "interfaith" and "diversity" do not pretend that we agree on every political or social issue. That's okay. At a table of Thanksgiving, there's a place for everyone. Unlike a scene crafted by Madison Avenue or even the best intentioned artist, our table is likely to be messy with people of different dispositions and dishes of various ethnic origin. Vive la difference!

I was also with several classes of Preschoolers this week. We talked about Thanksgiving and shared about all the things we were thankful for. Those sweet little faces spoke of mommies and daddies, friends and teachers, puppies and kitties and the pure joy of life. Each season brings to them a sense of newness, wonder, and awe. They see the world with fresh eyes, with pure hearts and with open minds. Yes, indeed, we can all learn from the youngest among us. They are quick to hold hands, quick to flash a smile and eager to share their love of life. God bless them. May their joy soften our hearts and heal the wounds that divide us.

In this era of social conflict in which people are quick to divide into partisan islands, let us be among those who find beauty in the contrasts. Let us be among those who link the islands into an archipelago community of mutual respect and friendship. An important step will be for each of

you to add your spirit and blessing to our 52nd annual Interfaith Thanksgiving service with our friends at First Plymouth Church, this Sunday evening, November 18 at 7:00pm.

This year, the service will be held at First Plymouth and will include inspiring music by our respective choirs and prayers by our clergy. After the service, we will enjoy a lovely dessert. This brief but meaningful and musical service sets a perfect mood to our Thanksgiving. Donations will be collected to benefit the local food banks and homeless shelters.

As our neighbors joined us in support of the Jewish community in the shadow of the massacre in Pittsburgh, please consider beginning your observance of Thanksgiving with this wonderful interfaith service.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving!
Rick
Rabbi Rick Rheins