

“EXTRAVAGANT THANKSGIVING”

Ezekiel 34:11-16; John 12:1-13

November 20, 2005

Thanksgiving Sunday

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Copyright © 2005

They called their group, GSASC, Graduate Students Acting for Social Change. In 1977, as a graduate student at Yale, I saw their flyer for an “alternative” Thanksgiving dinner on a campus bulletin board. The flyer read something like this: Tired of traditional Thanksgivings where people just eat too much and exchange meaningless banter? Come to the GSASC Thanksgiving, and spend your afternoon with people who care about the things that matter. Food provided; please bring canned food for the Hill food bank.”

For the past three years, I had joined the Yale chaplain and a group of “strays” he and his wife gathered around their table. I thought it might be interesting to do something different. So I called the phone number listed, and had a brief conversation with a man named Ben, who was a Political Science graduate student. He told me there would be about 20 of us gathered that day in the Dwight Hall Common Room, and warmly told me it would be nice to have a new person in the group.

It was a typical New England November day: raw, damp, with occasional flurries of very wet snow. My initial enthusiasm for a different Thanksgiving had cooled to a vague nervousness about attending an event where I would most likely know no one. I walked in the door of the common room, took off my coat, and looked desperately around the room for someone I knew. People were talking in groups of two and three, and as I scanned the room, my eyes lighted on one familiar face.

She was a fellow American Studies graduate student named Karen: tall, lean, with a narrow intense face, wire-rimmed glasses, and an unruly mop of black curly hair that fell to the middle of her back. The word in the department about her was that she was brilliant, driven, and a pain in the neck. In those early days of the Women’s Movement, she wanted her degree concentration to be in Women’s History and literature of the 19th century. Yale was not sure this was an appropriately well-defined and intellectually rigorous field of study. Karen was forging new ground, and she wore the weight of her leadership with a passionate and suspicious arrogance that alternately intrigued and exhausted me.

I crossed the room to stand beside her, and when she paused from her conversation long enough to notice my presence, she looked at me in surprise. “I haven’t seen you here before. Are you a member of GSASC?” she asked. I felt like I was being asked to present my credentials. I answered that I was not a member, but had seen the Thanksgiving flyer, and that seemed enough. Karen thawed some, and introduced me to her companions, two law students who were interning at the New Haven Legal Aid office.

At some point in the next 20 minutes or so of conversation, I noticed the smell of the room. Usually when we enter a place where a Thanksgiving meal is being prepared, our senses are immediately engaged by the scents of turkey roasting and the spice of pumpkin pie or mulled cider. In this room, there was only the winter smell of wet wool from the coats and hats drying out on the radiators. I didn't know what to make of it until Ben, the student I had spoken to on the phone, announced we were about to eat and that we should pick up our cups and bowls in the kitchen. I got in line, and was quickly served our meal: brown rice and water. I was a little dismayed but then I switched gears, and reminded myself there were plenty of people in the world who would indeed be thankful for this meal. I found a place at the table.

We all sat down except for Ben. He welcomed us all to GSASC's 7th annual Thanksgiving observance, which he believed was an important political statement. Traditional Thanksgiving dinners, he told us, represented all that was wrong with our society. They are all about waste and over-indulgence, the callousness of over-eating and the superficiality of pretending to be happy families when everyone knows that most families are oppressive and dysfunctional. Instead of a thanksgiving blessing to begin the meal, he invited each of us to speak briefly about the political or social issue that most concerned us.

And so it went. Person after person spoke about the arms race, about the objectification of women, about racism and classism, about poverty and the terrible schools and disenfranchised youth of the inner city. The speakers were sincere, and often passionate. All of them were committed to the creation of a different world, a new human ideal. After everyone had spoken, there was a moment of silent contemplation, weighty with anger, sadness, and frustration, as was the rest of the meal. People talked and talked, and the talk was of important issues. Nothing personal. Nothing light. Just the issues, all the ways the system was failing. At 5:00, Ben told us it was time to leave, and thanked us for being there. He expressed his hope that this alternative Thanksgiving would be significant, memorable for each of us.

I walked home. On my way, I passed by the Chaplain's house. Through the lighted windows, I could see the color and laughter of the games that always followed Thanksgiving dinner there. I stood for a moment watching, wanting to stop for a while but feeling it would be somehow disloyal to my afternoon's companions. My alternative Thanksgiving had left me stirred up and empty at the same time—confused—and that confusion stayed with me for years. Every Thanksgiving, whether with family or friends or both, I would inevitably think of that long November afternoon in New Haven and not know what to make of it.

It was this morning's lesson from the gospel of John that finally helped me find my perspective. Jesus certainly cared about the poor and social injustice; his whole life was testimony to a new order, the coming reign of God. But Jesus's life was more than his religious or social agenda. How many gospel stories tell of his eating and drinking, spending time just being with his friends. Jesus saw what was wrong in the world, but he also celebrated and gave thanks for the abundance of his life. When Mary, sister of Lazarus—in a personal gesture of amazing extravagant love—anoointed his feet with oil and wiped it off with her hair, Jesus saw in that extravagance not waste, but the honest outpouring of an intensely personal love and blessing, and to all present he said, "There is room in life for this." We must, to be whole, make room in our

lives for the personal joys, for the individual gestures of friendship and affection, the recognition of beauty and abundance around us that fills us up, that touches our hearts and reminds us that the gift of life is from God, and it is good. To live joyfully, to live thankfully: they are theological imperatives as important, as necessary as our care for the poor, our desire to change the world. I would contend that it is only our joyful living, only the recognition and celebration of the blessings of our lives that in the long run can sustain in us a passion for justice, for wholeness, for the kingdom of God.

It is right to give thanks every day for all that makes our lives good. And that knowledge should give light to our spirits and cause us to sing, to dance, to laugh, and to pray. There is work enough to do. But every day, and on days of Thanksgiving in particular, it is important to count our blessings and to know life's richness.

In this church, we always dedicate our pledges on Thanksgiving Sunday. We do that as a reminder both of the many blessings God showers on all of us, and of the particular blessing that is this church community. This is my 14th Thanksgiving with you all. In those years, you have supported my life in good times and hard. You have worked with me, laughed with me, shared your lives with me, and through it all, we have gathered in this place on Sunday mornings so our individual lives and our common life might be sustained by word and song and sacrament and prayer. This church is the place where I am directed over and over again to consider the particular gifts of my life. And I am so thankful for it. So now, in celebration of that, in celebration that God is, and God is good, that life is abundant, and this church in particular embodies all of that for me, I make my pledge to the church, and I invite all of you now to come forward, to place your pledges in the baskets that Ryan and I will be holding—and with every step give thanks to God. Amen.