

Last year, I came away from a Thanksgiving Sunday service with an unexpected gift. Typically, I'd come away being thankful for family, friends, good health and material well-being. But last year, I came away thinking about receiving. Something about that service made me realize that humility is associated with receiving. And that humility opens us to experience a deep connection to others and the world.

That's not the typical Thanksgiving story line. The story line is usually about us, as individuals, giving thanks for what we have. We stop for a day to be thankful for all the good in our lives. The primary focus is on being grateful for what we have. Appreciating our abundance of good health, friends, loved ones, maybe even our monetary comfort. Being grateful is a good thing, as far as it goes. But I get concerned it only goes so far. What I fear is that being grateful may be a slippery slope, leading us into a form of self-absorption.

In many religious traditions, the risk of self-absorption is lessened by taking it a next step, a very big next step. Many traditions thank God for their gifts, for what they have, life, love, family, a home. The focus then turns to an appreciation of God and the gifts we receive. This changes the story line. It's no longer about giving or having, but about receiving. And in comparison to God, one can only be humble.

Our faith tradition has largely moved away from a central focus on a personified God and a belief that all we have is given to us. I'm not going to touch the issue of whether that's good or bad. I'm just not going there. But I do wonder if we don't lose a sense of humility when we shift away from the belief that all gifts come from God. This matters, because we need that sense of humility in order to accept ourselves, and others, as imperfect human beings.

This issue becomes exacerbated in the context of our modern American culture. There is a lot of attention and focus out there on the notion of getting, having, doing and even giving. But I see little or no attention paid to the idea of receiving.

The story I grew up hearing about Thanksgiving, told of the pilgrims sharing a meal with the "Indians" and giving thanks. It was an image of family and friends gathered in celebration. It was a story about the pilgrims being thankful for having been *taught how* to survive in this hostile land. But I suspect, what they were mostly thankful for, was just being alive. Either way, its a focus on self.

I could be wrong about this. Maybe they had a *deep* appreciation of having been given a valuable gift. The kind of appreciation that prompts a sense of humility in the receiver. An experience that prompts a focus on the other rather than on one's self, but our cultural heritage would suggest otherwise.

There is much in our American culture about me and mine, about having and knowing and doing. There's an emphasis on what *I* bring to the party. There's great value placed on what *I* have. That kind of thankfulness often leads to pride and a self-centeredness. It can breed arrogance.

I don't see, in our American culture, many triggers that cause us to think deeply about receiving. In fact, it's easy to feel embarrassment about receiving. There's a way in which we don't want to be obligated to anyone for any reason. We are supposed to stand on our own, to make it on our own. The stereotypic image of success is the rugged individualist, who can stand alone, having no needs that require others to fulfill. We are taught to be self-reliant, independent.

I know that's true for me. I used to have a hard time letting people do anything for me. I'd work on my own house, repair my own car---I will admit, in years gone by that was largely because I couldn't afford to pay anyone. But the issue is bigger than that. I had a hard time letting people give me *anything*. I would demur. I would say "oh no, no, you needn't; Thanks, but no thanks".

I don't do that much anymore. While I'm not prepared to take just anything from just anyone, I've gotten much better at receiving and better about asking. I learned an important lesson a number of years ago. I was humbled into learning to receive.

About a year after I first started attending my home church, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I don't know that I had even joined the church by then. I knew the people were friendly and I knew some of them liked me. But I didn't really understand what it meant to be in community with those folks.

After my surgery, all sorts of offers for meals and care-taking came in. My first reaction was to say "no, no, that's just not necessary, we'll be fine." It was rather like stopping a train. Folks just kept insisting on helping, so I gave in. At first, I was just being polite, it was the easiest route, and the food *was* good.

Then came a call from the wife of our Minister Emeritus, saying they had been cooking and wanted to drop off some food. Don, at the age of 81, living on the fumes of his retirement money, drove into the driveway. I wanted to meet him at his car but he wouldn't allow it. I watched this small, frail man get his walker out of the car, and then he turned back to get a basket of food out. I watched this determined man clamor up the

front steps to bring us a meal. His effort and determination brought tears to my eyes. Don Kafka taught me the importance of receiving that day.

Don was born in Czechoslovakia and went to Norbert Capek's church in Prague, where our flower communion ritual was born. During the Nazi occupation, Don was in a forced labor camp in Germany. I don't know if that had anything to do with why giving was so important to him. But I do know *what I received* that day was infinitely more important than the food that fed us.

I want to pass on the lesson Don taught me. There is something powerful in genuine giving. And there is something powerful in truly receiving. Genuine giving calls for genuine receiving. And genuine receiving requires a willingness to be humble. To truly receive means we place a greater focus on the other than on self.

I think we need more receiving and more humility in both our personal and congregational lives. Receiving is a critical part of the natural flow of give and take. Receiving is a necessary component in manifesting our covenantal belief in being in right relation with one another and with the world.

Receiving is a gift we can give to ourselves and to each other. And there's no way of knowing when such a gift will be given or received. There's no way to predict where a gift will come from. Years ago, I expected only a basket of food from Don Kafka. I got a life lesson instead. Last Thanksgiving Sunday, I got another gift, and it came from just one sentence in the liturgy. Today, I offer it to you. "From you I receive, to you I give, together we share and from this we live".

May it ever be so.

Amen