

# THANKSGIVING EVE SERVICE

Nov. 25, 2020

Revs. Richard Maraj, Lori Fleming and Richard Rogers

## SOLO

*Rusty Ferracane: "We Gather Together" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on the piano)*

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing,  
In silence and service Divine will is done  
The word ever stressing, The wonder expressing,  
In Spirit, we are free, In Christ, we are one!

We come to sing praises with glad alleluias,  
And know that in giving our blessing shall be.  
Let this congregation proclaim the new creation;  
In Spirit, we are one, In Christ, we are free.

## WELCOME

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Good evening, everyone, and welcome to our annual Thanksgiving Eve worship celebration! It is a little bit different this year, but we are so thankful to be able to do this, and to be able to celebrate all the incredible gratitudes. I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, and I'm thrilled that you are joining us!

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** And I'm Rev. Lori Fleming; I'm the pastoral care minister here at Unity of Phoenix. It is a blessing to be with you on this Thanksgiving Eve.

**Rev. Richard Rogers:** Happy Thanksgiving, everybody! I'm glad you're here. Rev. Richard Rogers!

## INTENTION

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** And our intention this evening is to focus on the lessons and the blessings that we've experienced in this crazy year of 2020 that isn't quite finished.

On this national holiday of Thanksgiving, when our whole country is thinking about the things they're grateful for, we hope that you can use the blessings that you have in your life to create more blessings, knowing that it's God's good pleasure to bless us and prosper us and bring us peace and joy and love.

## OPENING PRAYER

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** So I invite you right now just to close your eyes; take a deep, relaxing breath; take another deep, slow, relaxing breath ... as we just set aside all the busy-ness and all the activities just to rest in this moment. To rest in God's peace: that peace that surpasses all human understanding. That peace that reassures us that we are never alone, but – in this moment and every moment – we are always in the fullness and the presence of God's light and God's life. God's love and wisdom and understanding and unlimited possibilities.

So, again, take a deep breath as we open our hearts this evening in a spirit of gratitude and celebration for all the amazing goodness and abundance and blessings that are in our lives. So we give thanks for all that has happened up until this moment, and we open a space to give thanks for the even greater things still to come. We pray and affirm all this through the Living Spirit of God. And so it is. Amen.

## **SOLO**

***Rusty Ferracane: "Thankful" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on the piano)***

Somedays we forget  
To look around us  
Somedays we can't see  
The joy that surrounds us  
So caught up inside ourselves  
We take when we should give.

So for tonight we pray for  
What we know can be.  
And on this day we hope for  
What we still can't see.  
It's up to us to be the change  
And even though we all can still do more  
There's so much to be thankful for.

Look beyond ourselves  
There's so much sorrow  
It's way too late to say  
I'll cry tomorrow  
Each of us must find our truth  
It's so long overdue

So for tonight we pray for  
What we know can be  
And on this day we hope for  
What we still can't see  
It's up to us to be the change  
And even though we all can still do more  
There's so much to be thankful for.

Even with our differences  
There is a place we're all connected  
Each of us can find each other's light

So for tonight we pray for  
What we know can be  
And on this day we hope for  
What we still can't see  
It's up to us to be the change  
And even though this world needs so much more

There's so much to be thankful for

## SHARING OF GRATITUDES

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** Thank you, Rusty and Craig, for your beautiful music.

In this part of the service, the ministers get to express things that they're grateful for. This has been a crazy year with the pandemic, and changing everything in the way that we do business, in the way we live our lives, in the way we go to the grocery store. One of the things that I'm really grateful for – not only the place I live, where I can work out of – but also all of the people in my life who have taught me the lessons that I have used in coping with this crazy year.

I can remember a youth minister when I was growing up, who opened the field for me to have questions about religion as a teenager: what I believed and what I didn't believe. I remember an English teacher that I had, who sent us into the library to learn the Dewey decimal system with a treasure hunt. And it was fun to learn where things in the library were. I remember all the things my parents taught me that helped me get through this time. My mother taught me to cook, and so I've been able to have meals when we couldn't go out to eat during this pandemic.

So I stand on the shoulders of those who have come before me. I'm so grateful for them. I'm so grateful for my family. And I'm grateful for this spiritual community.

**Rev. Richard Rogers:** So, for me, the thing this year that I'm grateful for ... I'm really grateful for ... You know, I think – for all of us – my health and the health of everyone that I love. The other thing that I'm really profoundly grateful for this year ... I don't know about you, but as I get older, what I began to notice was the goals that I set for every year got more and more "safe." And I really believe that, as we get older, sometimes the world that we create just becomes more and more safe.

So this year, I set a crazy, big goal for myself. I set a goal that was so huge for myself that, when I told my wife what it was, she tried to talk me out of it. Not because she doesn't love me, but because she wants me to feel successful. Right? So I had this goal. I said, "*No, babe; I think we can do it. I think I can do it. This is the goal I want.*" I am not going to tell you what it was, but I had a huge goal for this year. And what I want you to know is that, when the pandemic hit, I really had to decide if I could ... if God was big enough that – even in this pandemic – there was enough good that I could still create this goal. That I could reach this goal. And I decided I was still going to go for it; I didn't back down. I didn't give up. I had this huge goal. The pandemic came; everything changed. And I was crystal clear what I was about this year.

And what I want you to know is: I knocked that goal out of the park this year. And, in fact, I knocked that goal out of the park by the end of October. And, for the last month, I have been in excess of where I wanted to be this year: in a greater place. And I am so excited to really look at my goals for the new year, because I challenge myself to go bigger than maybe I have in years and years. Maybe since my 20's and my 30's! I went over the top.

And sometimes what I feel is that – to be fully alive – we have to really put ourselves to the test. We have to recommit to living a bigger, greater, more powerful life. Because I think our tendency as we get older is just to get comfortable. So, for me, I give thanks for the infinite goodness of God that is greater than any desire, greater than any intention, greater than any possibility. And that I live and I move and I have my being in the fullness of my Creator. And I give thanks for that!

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** You know, I think we all know that Thanksgiving is not only a great tradition, but it's an amazing spiritual practice that blesses our lives in so many ways. And one of the ways I think sometimes we have a hard time living in gratitude every day is when we hold on to an expectation of how life should be. And this year has been a challenge of that for myself and for all of us. You know, life

not going the way we want can sometimes get us stuck in levels of frustration, to the point that we don't see all the good in our lives.

So the first thing I'm grateful for is the practice of letting go of expectation, and just opening up and enjoying life as it is. Some of the things I've enjoyed that I didn't think I'd enjoy as much is: I enjoy my house! Since I've been staying there so much *[laughs]*, I have been able to appreciate the beauty, the safety, the coziness and the nurturing and joyful feeling I feel in my home.

The second unexpected thing that I've appreciated this year is technology. It is because of technology so many people are able to continue to work in their homes. It's because of technology – through Zoom – my family and I have had so many family birthdays and gatherings and celebration. And those technologies have really made a huge, huge difference. And a spin-off of that is: While we've had to spend more time isolated and alone, in some ways I feel more connected with people, even though they're distant. Because we've had to work a little harder to reach out and connect, to share stories, to share what's going on. To see each other on Zoom.

So it's been an interesting experience to deepen your own practice, because you're more alone, but it's a cool thing that we've been able to have the technology and the opportunities to reach out. And even if we're not close to people, still feel close. I mean, I can say – in this year – I feel so loved. I feel so supported. I feel so blessed to be a part of this spiritual community, this amazing staff. And to be a part of my incredible family, who are all in Canada, the majority. And all my friends.

And so, there is so much to be thankful for, even in the most challenging times. My question is: What are you most thankful for? What are the things that have blessed your life in this pandemic? Because I know – for all of us – there are so many things to be thankful for.

## **SOLO**

***Rusty Ferracane: "In This Very Room" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on the piano)***

In this very room  
There's quite enough love for one like me,  
And in this very room  
There's quite enough joy for one like me,  
And there's quite enough hope  
And quite enough power to chase away any gloom,  
For Spirit – yes, Spirit – is in this very room.

And in this very room  
There's quite enough love for all of us,  
And in this very room  
There's quite enough joy for all of us,  
And there's quite enough hope  
And quite enough power to chase away any gloom,  
For Spirit – yes, Spirit – is in this very room.

## **MEDITATION**

**Rev. Richard Rogers:** Let's move into our time of meditation. I want you to close your eyes, and let your heart feel the overflowing goodness of God. Just breathe that in. We just breathe in the infinite blessings of God. That, even this year, we have been surrounded by the infinite blessings of God. So

breathe in the abundance all around you; breathe in the good. And, as you exhale, exhale just overflowing gratitude. Breathe in the infinite goodness of God, and exhale gratitude. Breathe in the infinite blessings of God, and exhale gratitude.

That, when we move into that deeper connection with our Source – the deeper connection of the Spirit of God within – we realize that we live in an infinite universe. And that this connection to this infinite universe is actually our next spiritual step. That – as we connect with the power of the Infinite within – we get more calm. We get more peaceful. We get more loving. We feel more safe. Because everything is provided.

I connect with the Infinite, and I feel this overflowing gratitude with life. With God. That I am wildly, divinely blessed. That there are levels of good that I've never even touched. And yet, as I breathe them in – as I open my mind, my heart, my soul to receive the overflowing goodness of God – gratitude is my profound experience. Gratitude is my path. Gratitude is my way. Gratitude is my natural reaction to God.

Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God, for this day; for everything in it; for all the blessings that all too often go unnoticed. For the abundance of friends and family and of good. And we hold in prayer all of our brothers and sisters around the world – that we are one people. One family. One community. And even one nation under God. And so it is. Amen.

## MESSAGE

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** Thank you, Rev. Rogers, for that beautiful meditation.

Why was the Thanksgiving soup so expensive? It had 24 “karats.”

I heard about this amazing science experiment. They crossed an octopus with a turkey; now there's enough drumsticks for everyone!

What did the turkey say to the hunter on Thanksgiving Day? “*Quack, quack, quack, quack, quack.*”

Craig! Why did the turkey play the drums in his band? Because he already had the drumsticks! [*Laughs*]

What I would like to make most for Thanksgiving dinner is reservations!

Alright; my family told me to stop telling Thanksgiving jokes; I told them I couldn't do it “cold turkey.”

My talk is entitled, “The Lessons and Blessings of 2020.” We're experiencing this “new normal” as we quarantine, wear masks, worry about getting tested, and stay home as much as possible. Most of us are really, really tired of it about now. I'm pretty sure I have some of the symptoms of COVID-fatigue, and you may, too. We're frustrated because can't find the toilet paper we like. We're frustrated because we can't go out to eat with our friends. We're really frustrated that we can't have the traditional Thanksgiving dinner with all of our friends and family because of COVID. And we may be just a little bit angry, because we want to be over this.

But I'm wondering if you've thought about the lessons and the blessings that we've learned in this crazy year we've been living. You know, throughout my life I've read self-help books. I've gone to workshops. I've listened to gurus, and basically tried to find the secret of happiness and prosperity. After a while, the workshop leaders and authors and spiritual teachers all started to sound alike! I learned that the secret to having a happy and living a fulfilled life is really simple: The secret is cultivating an attitude of gratitude.

Alan Cohen, in his book, *I Had It All the Time*, says it this way: *“The attitude of gratitude brings altitude.”* He means that gratitude and generosity are inseparable sides of the same divine coin: the coin of giving and receiving.

When we are grateful for what we’ve received, we naturally want to share our blessings with other people. We may think it’s easier to be generous when we have a lot ... but the truth is: we have a lot because we’re generous! The more we give, the more we open the doors for greater abundance to flow into our lives. Reciprocity is this flow of giving and receiving, and giving and receiving ... because gratitude is a spiritual practice that brings us closer to God.

Remember? Jesus said it this way: That *“It’s God’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom of heaven.”* It’s a spiritual law that the more we give, the more received. So be careful what you give. We all know that we reap what we sow: that, if we plant tomato seeds, we don’t get corn. But we don’t always reap from the same fields in which we sow. If we’re constantly loving and compassionate and giving, our whole world will be filled with people who are loving and compassionate and giving. Because that’s what we’ll attract! Even if we haven’t given directly those qualities to them personally, we receive it from some other source. If we’re a cranky curmudgeon, we can be assured that that’s how our world will be.

The more we give, the more the Universe opens the floodgates, and the more is available to us: so much that we get to choose what we want! We don’t have to settle for just any old thing! That’s what Cohen means by “altitude.” Being grateful brings blessings into our lives

In another part of his book, he says, *“The principle that the ‘attitude of gratitude brings altitude’ is the ‘heaven-on-earth’ inverse of a fearful mind’s notion of a vicious cycle.”* The principle that an “attitude of gratitude brings altitude” is the “heaven-on-earth” inverse of a fearful mind’s notion of a vicious cycle. Cohen calls it the “delicious” cycle!

We all know what a vicious cycle is: doing the same thing over and over again, and getting different results. When we think the same way all the time, we always get what we’ve been thinking about, even if it’s negative. If we’re experiencing something in our lives that we don’t want, we can change the way we’re thinking and how we’re acting and get different results. Having an “attitude of gratitude” is the opposite of a vicious cycle. As the “delicious” cycle, gratitude brings our greater good to us in abundance: heaped up and overflowing.

We’ve all heard the story of Job. I learned it in Sunday school when I was in elementary school. He had all these terrible things happen to him. He lost his children. He lost his wife. He got sores all over his body. He lost everything that he had ... and he was a very rich man. And he said, *“God meant it for good.”* God meant it for good! How could anyone be grateful when they experienced all those terrible things?

It may be hard for us to be grateful because of everything that’s going on with this pandemic. I personally feel like a lot of my freedom has been taken away. I would have loved to have taken that vacation that my husband and I had planned for the end of March that we didn’t get to do. I miss my friends and those family members that we just can’t see, because we can’t be near them. But I get a choice. I can focus on what I’m lacking and what I’m missing – creating more lack and a vicious cycle of negativity. Creating a downward spiral and attracting more lack. Or I can somehow turn my thoughts into a “delicious” cycle: a new way of thinking. A new way of doing. A new way of being.

Instead of focusing on the things I’m not able to do because of COVID-19, what if I begin to be grateful for all the things I can do? I’m so grateful that I have a comfortable home that I can work from. The

Internet connects me with just about everyone. I'm so grateful for all the new tricks this old dog has learned ... who knew the word "Zoom" would become a noun? Because Zoom is now a thing!

The more I'm grateful for, the more good I enjoy in my life. Here's the amazing part: I get a choice! Do I bless everything in my life? Or do I curse the things that I don't want in my life? Because everything I bless I get more of. Cool, huh?!? And everything I curse, I get more of. I'm not sure I like that so much.

How are we using the power of our mind to create the world that we live in? Are we moaning and complaining about not finding toilet paper and laundry detergent? People are hoarding again ... Or are we being grateful for the greater good: counting our blessings every single day?

You know, it takes me about 25 minutes to get to church. One of the blessings of COVID is the ability to work from home. I'm grateful, because that means I'm not driving my car for almost 10 hours a week. I'm saving gas and wear-and-tear on my car, and I'm getting just about everything done that I need to do.

Because I'm not driving back-and-forth to church, another blessing is that I've had time to cook meals at home a lot since this started. I made a game of it, and I challenge myself to go a whole month and not repeat a meal. I didn't know I knew that many recipes! But I've been saving them in a file; I've been inspired to cook healthy, delicious meals. Do you know there are a number of online websites that have recipes; my favorite is "Epicurious." I'm going to put this all together – my mother's recipes; my recipes – into a book. Maybe some day I'll publish a cookbook; that's a blessing!

Gratitude is like a spiritual muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it grows. The stronger it grows, the more power we have to use it to benefit ourselves and the world. The more we practice gratitude, the more capacity we have to receive abundantly. The more we practice gratitude, the more capacity we have to receive abundantly!

Can we learn to be grateful on the level of Job? To be grateful for everything? No matter what it looks like? Even if it seems really, really bad? Knowing that what we bless brings blessings? Alan Cohen said, "*The attitude of gratitude brings altitude.*" Can we be so grateful that we're elevated to the consciousness on the level of the Divine?

In Genesis, God created the world in seven days. And he pronounced it good. "It is good!" is a divine blessing that brings our good to us quickly! Easily! Gracefully! Elevated to the level where we bless everything: everything we call good. COVID-19. The diagnosis. The kindness of strangers. The last package of toilet paper. Everything! Because it's all good! Because God means it for good!

Many of us are having to find new ways to celebrate our Thanksgiving traditions this year. One family was challenged every year with getting everyone together on Thanksgiving. As their kids had grown up and gotten married, there were in-laws who wanted to have Thanksgiving dinner. And so the kids – grown kids – would try to make everyone happy, and they tried to go to three or four different Thanksgiving dinners. And everyone ended up feeling slighted or stressed or angry. So the family decided that they would hold Thanksgiving dinner on the day after Thanksgiving. They gave everyone a warning ahead of time. Everybody did their Thanksgiving thing with the relatives. And then they came to Mom and Dad's house on Friday after Thanksgiving. And they had a fabulous day together! No one had to run off anywhere to another dinner; they spent some real quality time together.

So on this unusual Thanksgiving Day, I invite you to look for new ways to celebrate this holiday of gratitude. We have cell phones; we can Facetime each other. We can Zoom. In the paper this morning, there was a whole article on how to bring your laptop to the table, so that you could have a Zoom call,

and you could show everybody what the turkey and the mashed potatoes and the sweet potatoes looked like. So there's a way to connect, even if we can't be physically together.

On this day the nation has set aside to be thankful, I invite you to think about the lessons and the blessings of 2020. Thank you!

## **GIFTS AND TITHES**

**Rev. Richard Rogers:** So we want to thank you all for your generous support of this ministry over the last year. You know, there's been so many ways that our ministry has been called to do things that we've never done before. And our congregation has been so generous in their support, in their encouragement, in all the ways that we've been reaching out to serve you and our greater community.

So right now we're going to do our offering. And, whether you're going to give electronically, or you're going to send in a check, I invite you to hold your gifts in your hand. And our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* Together: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."*

So we give thanks for every gift and every giver. And we dedicate this gift to the absolute increase of God's good in our lives. That, as we give, we will receive ten-, one hundred-, one-thousand-fold. Thank you, God! Thank you, God; thank you, God! And so it is. Amen.

## **SOLO**

**Rusty Ferracane: "The Prayer" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on the piano)**

I pray you'll be our eyes and watch us where we go.  
And help us to be wise in times when we don't know  
Let this be our prayer as we go our way  
Lead us to a place; guide us with your grace  
To a place where we'll be safe

I pray we'll find your light  
And hold it in our hearts.  
When stars go out each night,  
Eternal star you are.

Let this be our prayer  
When shadows fill our day  
Lead us to a place; guide us with your grace  
Give us faith so we'll be safe

*[In Italian]*

Sogniamo un mondo senza più violenza  
Un mondo di giustizia e di speranza  
Ognuno lo dia la mano al suo vicino  
Simbolo di pace, di fraternità

We ask that life be kind  
And watch us from above  
We hope each soul will find  
Another soul to love

Let this be our prayer  
Just like every child  
Needs to find a place  
Guide us with your grace  
Give us faith so we'll be safe

*[In Italian]*

È la fede che  
Hai acceso in noi,  
Sento che ci salverà

## **CLOSING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** So thank you for being with us this evening: this sacred Thanksgiving Eve service! Tomorrow as you go about your day with the turkey and all the trimmings, and the few people that you're able to have around you – or if you get to make a Zoom call or talk to your family who aren't there – just remember that the reason for this season is to be grateful for everything that we have.

Thanks so much for joining us tonight! Have a blessed day!

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