

A MARK TWAIN THANKSGIVING  
A Homily Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham  
Sunday, November 21, 2010

Mark Twain was born 175 years ago this month. Fifty years later, he published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, from which Molly told us the story of Huck and the runaway slave, Jim. That book made fun of a society had had tolerated slavery. It told the story of a boy in the language a boy might use, looking at the society his elders had made and not speaking well of it. Along with *Moby Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Little Women*, it's one of the first great and totally American novels. And Mark Twain was nothing if not American, and one to make fun.

One Thanksgiving, already a famous writer, he was in Italy, speaking and promoting his books. Italian food was okay, Twain thought, but there he wrote a humorous Thanksgiving piece about missing real American Thanksgiving food – roast turkey, cranberry sauce, stuffing, pumpkin pie. It was the year this whole building was picked up, put on log rollers, and, pulled by horses, moved here from its original location, two miles away. Just after Thanksgiving.

Twain didn't like most churches. He said that he believed in God, but not in the God that most Americans found in the Bible. His father had felt the same. His uncle John was a Universalist. Twain said that for most people God of the Bible "is a God who mouths love and justice, yet who invented Hell." He also didn't think much of Heaven, at least when it was described as a sort of endless church service. (Don't worry! This one will be over soon! But not until I get you laugh, or at least smile, as Twain would have wanted.) When asked which he wanted to go to, heaven or hell, he'd reply: "I don't want to express an opinion; I have friends in both places." His conclusion was that heaven had a better reputation for climate, hell for interesting company.

He liked to make fun of people who think you can get to heaven by fighting crusades to take somebody else's Holy Land away from them. Some of his humor was pretty gosh-darn serious. Like his War Prayer, in which he makes fun of a minister praying in time of war: "O Lord God, help [our soldiers] to tear their solders to bloody shreds with our shells. . . to cover the fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead . . . to lay waste their humble homes . . .[and] wring the hearts

of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief . . . [and] turn them out roofless with little children to wander . . . in rags and hunger and thirst.” Some people didn’t find this funny at all. Because Twain could make hard fun of people who first say one thing and then do another.

“The Gospel of Peace,” he wrote, “is always making a good deal of noise with its mouth . . . [but] during all the past generation the Christian poor have been taxed almost to starvation-point to support the giant armaments which the [supposedly] Christian governments have built up, each to protect itself from its [equally Christian neighbors], and, incidentally, to snatch any patch of real estate left exposed by its [non-Christian] owner.” This, it seems to me, is a pretty accurate of history in Twain’s lifetime, which coincided with late Western imperialism, even by the USA.

Five years before he died, in 1905, Twain was interviewed by a reporter about Thanksgiving. “Every year every person in America,” he said, is invited to concentrate his or her thought on all the many reasons to be thankful to God “for the blessings conferred upon [us] and upon the human race during the [previous] twelve months. This is well and as it should be; but it is too one-sided. No one ever seems to think of [God’s] side of it.” No one ever asks what we humans have done or not done to make God thankful or regretful for having given us the blessing of life and so much more. “No one has had good feeling enough to wish [that God] might have a Thanksgiving day [also]. There is nothing right about this,” said Twain. If you have complaints, “Do you suppose everything has gone to God’s satisfaction [this past year]?” Mark Twain asked.

During 1905 he pointed out that God may not have been too grateful to see Russian Christians persecuting and killing their neighbors just for being Jews; might not have been too happy to learn that in New York insurance companies had been found to have cheated widows and orphans; or that in the Belgian Congo the white colonial masters sent by King Leopold of Belgium had killed another 100,000 black Africans through brutal forced labor.

So before we sit down to count our own blessings and give thanks for them, Twain implied, maybe we Americans ought to ask ourselves what we are going to do ourselves to make God more thankful to look down upon us, as among the most blessed of peoples upon this earth.

Which brings us back to the message that Leslie Nelken brought us about today about the work of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and about what we can do when we invite a “Guest at Your Table” for Thanksgiving and for all the evenings between now and Christmas.

No matter how hard things may have been for your family or mine this past year, we still have much for which to be grateful. And yet we have sisters and brothers – fellow human beings and children of God, all around the world whose basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are being denied. Who need our support in the struggle just to get access to clean drinking water as a human right, especially after humanitarian crises after an earthquake in Haiti or floods in Pakistan. Who need our support in the struggle for economic justice and a living wage. Who need our support in the struggle for civil liberties under democratic rule.

Mark Twain died a hundred years ago. I think a chief goal of his humor, his writing, his life -- was to try to get his fellow human beings to wake up: to wake up, and be more grateful, yes, but also self-aware – responsible to the earth, to our fellow human beings, and to a God who is greater than any one religion or nation. He didn't much like official ministers in churches because he thought we should all be ministers. He loved the music human beings can make – especially the old spirituals, making joy out of sorrow, and the old Scotch-Irish hymn tunes -- those Jacqueline has played for us today. None more than the one we heard in mediation earlier, and which now, in closing, we sing together: #298 in the hymnals, “Wake Now My Senses.”

## BENEDICTION

“Loyalty to petrified opinion,” said Twain, “never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul.” So don't just rely upon your senses. “You can't depend upon your eyes,” he also said, “when your imagination is out of focus.” So go forth now with grateful, generous, imaginative hearts. Crave justice and peace and gratitude for all people in this world, beginning with yourselves. Then go as you go with such a world clearly focused in your imaginative compassion. Amen, and amen.