

SMALL VICTORIES

A homily for Thanksgiving by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Twenty-four years ago, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, in a declaration widely viewed as prescient at the time, announced that we had reached what he called “The End of History.” Liberal democratic governments and free-market capitalist economies had spread from the West across the globe, Fukuyama observed, and had established themselves as the only plausible answer to the fundamental problems of human history.

At the start of the 20th century, there were very few democracies in the world – or none, if democracy requires extending the right to vote to all citizens. By the end of the century, the number of democracies had approached 120. In light of this sweeping conquest, demonstrated by the fall of the Soviet Union and of the Berlin wall, Fukuyama declared in 1992 that the social and cultural evolution of human governance had come to its natural conclusion – hence, the end of history.

Except that history seems to have started up again. With the election of Donald Trump, the US has joined the global march toward more autocratic forms and styles of governance. Far from being vanquished, the fundamental problems of human history seem to have returned with a vengeance. And the chances of addressing them in any significant way seem to be diminishing by the day. Bigotry continues to fester, xenophobia continues to metastasize, terrorism continues to spread, carbon dioxide levels continue to rise, inequality continues to increase, and refugees continue to flee the increasing number of global conflict zones.

Here at home, the backlash against efforts to make our nation more open and accepting continues as well. Whatever progress we had made in addressing the pernicious presence of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression seems to be grinding to a halt – or has already begun moving in reverse. Maybe history hasn’t ended. Maybe it has just begun repeating itself.

Which is why I say: thank God that Thanksgiving has finally arrived. We’ve never needed it more. The story that gets told about the first Thanksgiving may be historically fanciful, but it’s no less compelling for being partially made up. And besides, the first Thanksgiving didn’t take place because people had managed to find pleasure and delight when times were good. Rather, it took place because they had managed to survive when times were bad.

During the winter of 1621, more than half of the hundred-plus settlers in the Plymouth colony had succumbed to disease and cold, sometimes dying at the rate of two or three a day. But over the following summer, the growing season had been generous;

and the settlers had confidence that they would bury fewer of their number during the winter to come. Remembering their loved ones who had died, the settlers gathered on what came to be called the first Thanksgiving to give thanks for what they had.

As an expression of their gratitude for the life and sustenance they had been given, the settlers prepared a meal together — symbol and substance of the fledgling victory of life over death. In the grand scheme of human history, the harvest they gathered in and the meal they prepared may have been small victories, but they were victories nonetheless.

In her latest book, the celebrated food writer and media star Julia Turshen describes how her love affair with cooking developed. She begins the introduction to her new book, *Small Victories*, by saying:

It began with celery. As a kid obsessed with everything about cooking, I decided I should be able to chop precisely and sauté effectively. I convinced my parents to buy me endless bunches of celery to practice with. I spent entire weekends perfecting my dice and heating up a little oil in a skillet in which I would attempt to flip the celery without using a utensil, just like I had seen all of my favorite chefs and teachers do on television. My very supportive family ate more sautéed celery than they would probably like to remember. Committing the motions to memory, I eventually grew comfortable with the techniques and continued to build on the celery, turning the sauté into a soup, a stir-fry, and more. Teaching myself to cook wasn't a quick process, but along the way I stopped to celebrate each accomplishment and began to consider them small but very worthwhile victories. The day no celery landed on the floor: Small victory!

Turshen goes on to describe how cooking a meal, no matter how simple or complex, is never a matter of doing one big thing, but rather a matter of doing many small things. She says, “Truly, if you can boil water, you can make just about anything.” Making progress in the kitchen, in other words, is an endless sequence of small victories.

In my view, the same is true everywhere else in life. There are no vast leaps in human life or in human history; there are only small changes that over time add up to big differences. Creating change in our lives or making a difference in our world comes not from one big difference that happens all at once, but rather from many small differences that happen over time and eventually add up to something remarkable — or something terrible.

Especially when we're surrounded by daunting problems of unimaginable size, it's easy to get overwhelmed and think there's nothing we can do. But there's always something we can do and it always begins here and now. Look for a place where you can make a small difference — perhaps one that no one may even notice. Make it, and then

make another, and then another. That is how everything happens: small differences, made one at a time.

Letters to the editor are written one word at a time, carbon dioxide is reduced one bicycle at a time, elections are determined one voter at a time, rallies are formed one protester at a time, songs are sung one note at a time, refugees are housed one person at a time, and so on. Everything happens one small difference at a time.

Along the way, don't forget to express your gratitude for the good you see and the progress you make in the meantime. As supposedly happened at that mythic first Thanksgiving, gratitude gets expressed one meal at a time, one person at a time, one moment at a time. No matter how bleak the winter ahead, nor how dark the skies above, nor how dire the circumstances around, there's always some small victory that we can celebrate. In so doing, the faith and courage within us will rise up to meet whatever goodness surrounds us. And the road ahead will be clearer and brighter as a result.

So the next time you feel overwhelmed and heavy-laden, remember to stop and give thanks for whatever good you can find in your life and your world. Express your gratitude out loud — to yourself and those around you. It may represent only a small victory, but it will be a victory nonetheless, one of many more to come. After all, for people who believe in possibility, each moment represents not the end of history, but its beginning.