

Thanksgiving Turkeys, Paradox, and Godhood

Laura Summerhays

Note: This sermon was delivered in the Inwood Third Ward of the New York New York Stake on November 26, 2006.

On Thursday, I hosted my first Thanksgiving dinner. My brother, my sister-in-law, and my four nephews—ages twelve, nine, seven, and twenty-two months—squeezed into the little studio that I share with two cats; and we sat around my table and ate some traditional holiday fare. I had made most of the meal, but my sister-in-law brought the turkey to cook at my apartment. My brother and sister-in-law are a bit chaotic. Because I know this about them and know how much chaos is compounded when four children are involved, I knew not to believe my sister-in-law when she told me that they would arrive at my apartment at 6:00 or 7:00 A.M. to start cooking the turkey. I just went on with my cooking and finished everything I was making before they arrived about four hours late. Since they were expected at a friend's cabin that night, we had to flash-cook the turkey so they could eat dinner and leave before it got too late.

I have never cooked a turkey before, so I don't know much about it. I just know that we cooked this turkey in less than an hour and a half when you normally cook turkeys for about three hours. We cranked up the temperature and hoped for the best. What resulted was definitely moist and tasty, but I could not bring myself to eat more than one piece of it because it was rather pink. But I did eat that one piece and didn't say a word to my sister-in-law about how I thought it was a bit underdone. Everyone else seemed to like it, so I let it go.

My nephews did not share my diplomatic, tolerant disposition

that day. Though I believe they ate at least some turkey, they shunned my mashed potatoes, turned up their noses at my stuffing, and made retching sounds at my green beans. Because I love my nephews, I was not as appalled as an outsider might have been, but the kids were truly being horrid. Not only were they very rude about the food, they also made unappetizing jokes at various times throughout the day, broke my slinky, and lost my remote control (though that may have been my brother).

I kept my cool all day; but after they left, I called my sister in Utah and realized how annoyed I had been as I complained and complained and complained about how ill-behaved the kids were and how I could not believe our sister-in-law had not left me the brie and crackers, though it is true I should not have such temptations in my house anyway. I felt a little better after I talked to my sister, but then I felt worse because I hadn't mentioned how my sister-in-law had done most of the dishes and how my brother had brought me a beautiful autumnal centerpiece and a Christmas wreath. I also hadn't mentioned how cute their two-year-old was as he walked around calling for my cats, who wisely stayed in hiding all day. I had been too concerned with how many improprieties had been perpetrated against me. So I felt I was justly punished later that night when I spilled hot turkey stock on my thigh and ended up first with the paramedics at my house and later in the emergency room.

Somehow this all fits into the general conference talk by Elder Anthony D. Perkins that I'm supposed to speak about today.¹ Elder Perkins speaks of the dichotomy of children's and adults' experiences with God. He begins his talk: "Children in pure faith proclaim, 'We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.' But sometimes youth and adults do not feel the power of this simple declaration. Satan is the 'enemy to all righteousness'; thus he plants doubts about the nature of the Godhead and our relationship with Them." Though the remainder of his talk is not exclusively about our skewed ideas about the Godhead or about the opposition between childhood and adulthood, I want to focus on those concepts. Both of these ideas can be explored through the lengthy anecdote I just related. I want to focus mainly on the second point about childhood, but

first I want to make a quick point regarding our ideas about and relations with God.

Though I joke about the turkey stock spilled on my thigh being divine retribution for my attitude toward my family, I know that this belief about my God's relationship with me is no joke. I know that I have long struggled with a belief that God is out to get me, though I suppose I have made some headway in this regard in the last few years. I won't belabor this point, because Elder Perkins does a great job of outlining a lot of what he calls the "snares of false inadequacy, exaggerated imperfection, and needless guilt."²

The second point, to which I will devote most of the rest of my talk, is the notion of becoming childlike. Gospel discourse often refers to the need to become childlike, but it also encourages progression toward godhood. In 3 Nephi 11:38, Christ says "Ye must . . . become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God." This statement seems paradoxical if one considers inheriting a kingdom to be an act involving power that a child would not have. To add to the seeming contradiction, there is Brigham Young's declaration and injunction that "Gods exist, and we had better strive to be prepared to be one with them."³ This statement is thematically linked to the description in Doctrine and Covenants 132:20 about those who enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage: "Then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power." These three passages appear to be at odds. The first one seems to be suggesting that we should humbly regress to our childhood days, the other two that we should be pressing forward in power to our eventual godhood.

Over the last few years, I have become increasingly interested in paradoxes and contradictions within the gospel. There are many: Don't let your right hand know what your left is doing (Matt. 6:3), but also let your light shine before men (Matt. 5:16). Be still and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10; D&C 101:16), but also work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12; Mormon 9:27). And of course, this idea of becoming childlike but simultaneously becoming Godlike. I am convinced that these paradoxes are in God's communications with us to seduce us into really thinking about and grappling with some of the most impor-

tant things we have to learn in this life. *A Handbook to Literature*, a book I acquired in my days as an English major, says paradox “teases the mind and tests the limits of language; it can be a potent device.”⁴ I fully agree with this statement and believe that God uses this potent device to teach us his most invaluable lessons. These lessons are in the form of paradox, I believe, so that we have to work through them and, through this work, become familiar with the concepts and come to have ownership over them. God knows the syntheses of these paradoxes and wants us to know them, too. In fact, he seems rather eager to share knowledge with those who revere and serve him. He says in Doctrine and Covenants 76:7 that it is these people to whom he will “reveal all mysteries.”

So let’s look at this paradox of childhood and progression toward godhood. This is a very tricky paradox because it is difficult to define what childlike even means. I’m sure we’ve all heard that we need to be childlike, not childish. Usually, this means that we should behave like those nice, subdued children we know rather than the bratty ones.

I think it has to be more than this. The childlike/childish opposition is too easily deconstructed. It focuses on behavior instead of essence; and as we all know and can see by my Thanksgiving example, children are certainly not always well behaved. So what is the essence of childhood? What do children have in common with each other that adults do not have? The only indisputable thing I can think of is that they have lived for fewer years than adults. First, it means that they are less schooled in what is considered appropriate in whatever culture they are being raised in. Also, it means that, because they have had fewer experiences, they cannot make many predictions about what will happen next in their lives. Adults make a lot of predictions and have expectations based on past experience. Because we have seen how the world works, we close off our minds to different options. So I guess what children have that we no longer have is minds that are open to more possibilities. They place fewer limits on their actions and imaginings. Perhaps this is why they behave in ways we might term inappropriate.

In my story, my nephews acted very inappropriately. But they were also just being honest. They did not like the food set before them and didn’t see a reason to grit their teeth and just eat,

whereas I, an adult, have learned this art and therefore ate the pink meat my sister-in-law put on my plate regardless of its potentially bad consequences for my digestive and other systems. Luckily, nothing has happened to me from eating that turkey, but that's not the point. The point is that, in the name of behaving "appropriately," I disregarded my safety. I think this sort of conditioning is a possible explanation for the behavior of those in Nephi's prophecy who, in their carnal security, would say "All is well in Zion" (2 Ne. 28:21) when it was actually the opposite. Perhaps these people just didn't want to ruffle any feathers, step on any toes, rock any boats, or steady any arks. They did not want to be inappropriate.

I think God the Father Himself fits into descriptions we may use for children: expansive, imaginative, and possibly inappropriate. God transcends limits that we place on ourselves and on Him, be they logical limits or cultural limits. I remember once I was having a very hard time accepting the Atonement because I thought it was vastly unfair. Why should Christ have to suffer for something that I did? It seemed completely irresponsible for me to "cast [my] burden on the Lord" (Ps. 55:22). I guess I felt this way because I had lived in the world long enough to believe that you have to deal with the consequences of your actions. I was not willing to accept that, given my repentance, I really did not have to feel the full brunt of my actions' consequences because Christ was going to take that suffering from me. This picture did not match my expectations and "knowledge" of how the world works. In most earthly situations, casting responsibility for one's actions onto someone else is definitely inappropriate and even ghastly. But God is not beholden to the way the world works. (Remember he says in Isaiah 55:8 that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.") In that instant, that moment when we give our sins to Christ, we must embrace impropriety; by earthly standards, the Atonement is inappropriate.

Yesterday I was dismayed that I had to give this talk today. I felt utterly not up to it. I suppose it was because I have been feeling so strange about my relationship with God and Christ lately, and I was afraid I would get up and say something inappropriate. And maybe I have. But I think it's good to move beyond caring about that so much. If I'm afraid of talking about inadequacies and

struggles because it may seem inappropriate in a setting that really ought to be exactly where we *do* talk about inadequacies and struggles, there is something wrong. Could it be that if more of us were willing to buck propriety and tradition we would be further along in becoming childlike and even godlike? I have reason to believe so.

We find our example, our proof, in Christ: he is the perfect melding of child and God. He is the synthesis of all paradox. Like a child and like an incipient God, He behaved inappropriately for the culture in which he was raised: He said he was God's Son, He did things you weren't "supposed" to do on the Sabbath, and He spent time with those people despised in His society. For these and many other things, He is now revered, because we can see that these acts showed what is appropriate in the heavenly culture for which we were made. Like a child and like a God, He had an expansive, accepting mind. He saw how God's plan would work because He didn't allow His earthly experiences to cloud His eternal imagination and faith.

What if we follow Christ in this transcendence of earthly boundaries? What if we work to understand how to combine the childhood we have experienced with the godhood we perhaps hesitantly allow ourselves to think about? I believe we will find freedom, knowledge, creativity, and charity we can scarcely imagine in our tradition-bound minds.

Notes

1. Anthony D. Perkins, "The Great and Wonderful Love," <http://lds.org/conference/talk/display/0,5232,23-1-646-28,00.html> (accessed November 25, 2006).

2. Ibid.

3. John A. Widtsoe, ed., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 227.

4. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1996), 372.