

*November 24, 2013
(revised from November 19, 2006)*

10:30 a.m.

A THANKSGIVING FEAST

the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Sartain

Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-18



PLYMOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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The guiding image for the sermon today is a traditional Thanksgiving meal. The outline follows that image and goes like this: family, grace, meal and—last but not least—dessert. I begin, then, with family.

As Congregationalists, Thanksgiving is our holiday. The Lutherans might have Reformation Day in October, when Martin Luther pounded his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Chapel, and the Moravians might have a special claim on Christmas in December with their elaborate customs and rich traditions, but we claim November and the first American Thanksgiving as our distinctive heritage. For our small corner of the Christian tradition, this is a proud contribution.

A walk through Guild Hall bears witness to how important it is to us. The great embroidery has as its central image that first Thanksgiving feast. That noble image of the lavish board and the friendships spanning culture and race . . . that image stands at the center of our identity as American Congregationalists.

Still, for all our pride in being in the direct spiritual ancestral line of the first Pilgrims, our understanding of what really happened on that first Thanksgiving is pretty shallow. Many of us have yet to unlearn the warped version of the story we got in kindergarten when, to remember the feast, we made hand-print turkeys as the central theme of the holiday. In point of fact, it is more likely that fish or venison was the main dish that first Thanksgiving Day. To remember the Native Americans, we crafted large, long headdresses with construction paper feathers to wear, when it was actually the Plains tribes that wore these and not the Wampanoag—not to mention the fact that the Wampanoag consider it disrespectful for people from other cultures to wear their native costumes. These might seem like relatively little things, but we have likewise grown up with erroneous, disrespectful and even racist notions about the relationship between the Native Americans and the new immigrants. Perhaps there were moments of cozy friendship, but we also know that those moments quickly turned to something close, if not equal, to genocide.

If we claim this holiday as our own family story, we must claim it as it was and not just as we have romanticized it to be—and that includes some harsh realities that too often we have re-written and not bothered to correct. We can and we ought to find ways to honor the whole of the Thanksgiving story, and stand not so much in pride as we tell it as in humility.

That brings me to the next course for this Thanksgiving meal: our table grace, our blessing.

Two attributes of a good table prayer are humble thanks for what we have received and a reminder of those whom we are called to serve.

At our root as Congregationalists and as Americans in general, we are an immigrant people. Even though, as I said, the story has a shadow side, our ancestors came not to do harm but to pursue a dream for their lives and for the lives of their progeny. Some came willingly full of hope. Others came on slave ships against their own will. But no matter how they came, many, many of them faced what we might think to be insurmountable struggles to discover a path to dignity and freedom. We cannot grasp the sacrifices that were made by the

foremothers and forefathers who arrived under the shadow and the promise of Lady Liberty and her welcome to “the tired, the poor and the huddled masses yearning to be free.” And, we certainly forget that immigrants today are facing similar struggles, and sometimes worse, to find life, first of all, and then freedom and opportunity.

Garrison Keillor said of our newest immigrants:

(They are) Heroes, all of them – at least they’re my heroes . . . Everyone makes fun of New York cabdrivers who can’t speak English: they’re heroes. To give up your country is the hardest thing a person can do: to leave the old familiar places and ship out over the edge of the world to America and learn everything over again different than you learned as a child, learn the language that you will never be so smart or funny in as your true language. It takes years to start to feel semi-normal. And yet people still come—Russia, Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos, Ethiopia, Iran, Haiti, Korea, Cuba, Chile, and they come on behalf of their children, and they come for freedom. (*Newsweek*, 1998)

I spoke this weekend to Plymouth member Andrea Northwood, who is the Director of Client Services for the Center for Victims of Torture in St. Paul. She said that the immigrants today are like the immigrants from long ago in that they come here pursuing a dream—and many today have not come here by choice; they come because there was no other path if they wanted simply to live. She said: “Imagine, if you can, running for your life from the country of your upbringing. Imagine yourself, forced to start your life over in your mid-40s in a new country with a landscape, climate and culture completely foreign to you. Imagine your education and professional credentials were not honored. Imagine yourself in this new place with no idea of how to speak the language, with no idea even how to pronounce the alphabet.” These immigrants face racism, religious intolerance, a shortage of affordable housing as well as scars from struggles in the countries they came from that are unthinkable. They face all these challenges, as well as the complicated system of our government’s immigration laws.

And in the face of all that, they are grateful. Andrea said: “I wish you could hear these immigrants talk about America, their love for this country and their hopes for their lives here.” We read in the paper the problems regarding immigration reform, and our hearts and minds can harden because the issues are overwhelming, but these are not someone else’s problems. If we are going to claim with integrity the story of the Pilgrims as our own family story, then the story of immigrants today must be our ongoing concern. When we see them, we can see a part of ourselves, our great-grandmothers, our great great-grandfathers, stepping onto these shores with bright minds, and compassionate hearts and customs that seemed strange and perhaps even threatening to those who were already here. If you think Ethiopian food is strange, just think about lutefisk for a minute. These ones who can seem so strange to us, and even frustrating, they are a part of us, and they are a treasure to us, and we should count them among our blessings.

And so my table grace today, as well as being an expression of deep appreciation, is a reminder: as we give thanks for wealth, for comfort and for blessings, we must also remember and commit ourselves to acting on behalf of our neighbors who are struggling to learn to live in this new land. My Thanksgiving prayer is that we will use our strength and resources to draw out of our own story a continuing theme of generosity and benevolence toward all those seeking to make a life for themselves today.

With that said—with our family gathered and grace said—let us sit down, now, to the meal.

A little something to chew on: one stubborn myth about the first American Thanksgiving is that the happy Pilgrims were celebrating a great harvest. Actually, the harvest of 1621 wasn’t great at all. The barley, wheat and peas the Pilgrims brought with them from England failed. Fortunately, the corn did well enough that they were able to double their weekly food rations. The Pilgrims may have been happy, but they were happy just to be alive: the previous winter wiped out 47 people—almost half their community.¹

They believed that God was leading them to a new land, but they might have wondered what happened to God after they left England. Nothing came easily. Nothing came without a high cost. On that first Thanksgiving in this new, hard and godforsaken land, the Pilgrims had precious little for which to give thanks, and plenty about which to despair.

That intrigues me because I've seen it time and again: true Thanksgiving arises in us at the unlikeliest of times. Often and repeatedly I have heard people say how thankful they are in times of grief and grave illness, even death. They say: I'm grateful she didn't have to suffer. It's been hard, but I'm thankful because I've found out how many friends I have. I'm afraid, but more than ever I'm thankful for my life and what it has meant.

What these people bear witness to is a deep spiritual truth. The Psalmists in bitter exile in slavery gave thanks. The early Christians under oppressive persecution gave thanks. The Pilgrims, hungry, wasting and in deep, deep grief gave thanks.

On the other hand, the times when we are well taken care of seem to be times when we can most easily forget to be grateful. Think of how difficult it is to teach a well-tended-to child to say thank you. It does not come naturally to most of them; they need coaching, prodding, reminding—"What do you say?"

We grow up and are still the same way. Contented humans so easily take it for granted that what we need will be provided. It is instead in the midst of struggle and difficult that somehow we wake up to the gratitude for the simplest things, things like our own breath, the beating of our hearts, the warmth of our homes, the companionship of our friends and families, the presence of our church.

This same spiritual truth arises in our scripture lesson today. The people of Israel are about to come into the land that was promised to them after years of struggle. They stand on the threshold of a land rich, rich with blessings. The Bible says, "A land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which they would eat bread without scarcity, in which they would lack nothing." At that moment, God gives these words of instruction: "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God." The text goes on, "When you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you (will) forget the Lord your God . . . who led you through the great and terrible wilderness."

And so, when we mine our hearts for gratitude this Thanksgiving Day, let's not begin by turning our minds to all that has gone right in our lives. That is not the place to begin. Instead let us consider the struggles we have come through; the wilderness we have, by the grace of God, escaped; the hard times that did not undo us; the hurdles we have finally overcome; the low times from which, finally, we rose up despite the odds.

And if today you find that you are in the midst of the wilderness, not yet on the other side. If you stand under a heavy cloud and there is yet no sun breaking through. If you stand in a barren place and cannot find in your heart any prayer of thanks, I offer you the witness of this community and of generations of saints: there is a sustaining force at the heart of the universe that will, indeed, hold you and you will, someday, again, give thanks.

That heavy word, that meal, I suspect, leaves us craving something sweet, which is good because that longing for sweetness now comes just in time for dessert.

I offer you this sweet, but not too sweet, poem by Anne Sexton, "Welcome Morning."

There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry 'hello there, Anne'
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning
and I mean, though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table
to a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So, while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter in the morning,
lest it go unspoken.
The joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.²

There you have it: family, grace, meal, dessert . . . and one final word: the farewell, the hug, the kiss on the cheek. May your Thanksgiving Day be one of blessing. May your heart find it moves toward gratitude with ease because though this can indeed be a hard world, it is a good one and it is the intention of the Divine that you know it to be good—that we all know it to be good, all of us together. May it be so.

Amen.

¹Brockenbrough, Martha, *The Pilgrims Watched Football (And Other Thanksgiving Myths)*
[http://encarta.msn.com/column_thanksgivingmyths_marthahome/The_Pilgrims_watched_football_\(and_other_Thanksgiving_myths\).html](http://encarta.msn.com/column_thanksgivingmyths_marthahome/The_Pilgrims_watched_football_(and_other_Thanksgiving_myths).html)

²Sexton, Anne, "Welcome Morning" published in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Houghton Mifflin, March 1975.