

Sermon – Cathedral of the Incarnation

Thanksgiving 2016

Thanksgiving Day is a relatively new experience for me although thanksgiving is not. This is only my fifth Thanksgiving Day in this country. Each time it's been shared with different people but its typically taken on the same format – a meal with wine and the host asking that we share one item to be thankful for. I've yet to really engage the culture of Thanksgiving Day by watching the big parade on Fifth Ave. Like a good guest of your country I've tried to understand the history behind the day. You would know better than I that the roots of the custom lie with the early English puritan settlers, who gave thanks for deliverance from the perils of their journey and for God's bounty.

The puritans in England had rejected the seemingly endless amount of feast days that celebrated the life of the saints and so in the post reformation era of England it was decided that the church would call for particular days of thanksgiving whenever they felt God had delivered them from trouble or had provided a feast from the harvest.

Our reading from Deuteronomy reminds us that we have been giving thanks to God for over three thousand years for the deliverance of our forebears from exile and enslavement and the giving of land upon which the Israelites were to flourish. God instructed the Israelites that when they were to enter the land of promise and to receive it's bounty, they were to bring the first fruits of the harvest to the temple where they were to offer them in prayer to God. At that time they were to recount their own history of salvation, thereafter sharing the bounty with their families and aliens in their midst.

Fast forward to today and Thanksgiving Day as we experience it appears to have lost most of its religious roots becoming a day for feasting followed by a day of shopping. It is though a common day for thanksgiving for people of all faith traditions, and for those of no faith tradition.

For Christians of course every Sunday is celebrated as a day for thanksgiving because we gather together to share in the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Jesus, that is set apart for us during the prayer of Great Thanksgiving. The Eucharistic prayers are all about recounting the salvation history of God from the exodus and culminating in the sacrifice of Jesus through crucifixion. The prayer calls us to memorialize Jesus' sacrifice and to give thanks.

We are all people of the exodus and we are continually called out of exile and enslavement into a better world. As we make this journey we become agents of change for making the world a better place to live for everyone, our families and the aliens in our midst. No one is to be excluded. In order for us to live out this request from God we are to develop generous hearts, being thankful for our own rescue and making efforts to ease the pain of others. By living this way we can be surprised by how God will provide for us and change us.

The Lakota people, whom we support with gifts for their feeding program at St John's Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota, list generosity as one of the twelve virtues of being Lakota. It is called *Canteyuke* (can-te-you-keh) or *has a heart*. As with most indigenous peoples these virtues are handed down through storytelling and I'd like to share briefly one of their stories.

It was winter and food was scarce within the community. The elders decided that they would send their two best hunters deep into the forest to hunt for deer while the others would forage closer to their camp. See the Bear and Left Hand were selected to try and snare a deer in the deep forest. They set out in snowshoes and walked for many days and nights but were unable to locate tracks of a deer. They were running out of food themselves surviving on small strips of dried rabbit. Each night they would camp in the snow, huddled by a small fire. The end was near as their strength waned. When they woke one morning a deer came crashing through the thicket and fell into a snow filled gully. The two hunters couldn't believe their good fortune and rushed to draw their bows and kill the deer before it escaped.

When the deer's last breath drifted into the cold air, See the Bear and Left Hand pondered their luck. They trussed up the deer carcass and started out dragging it back through thick snow to the camp. Two days into their journey they came across a skinny coyote that asked them for food because the winter had been harsh for him as well. Left Hand stated the obvious that winter was a time of hunger and they couldn't share their deer as their community was hungry too and expected the full carcass. See the Bear though felt compassion and cut off strips of meat and gave it to the coyote. Left Hand was not happy.

A few days later a flock of magpies settled in the trees above them and asked for some of the meat to feed their young. Left Hand reiterated what he had told the coyote and refused to give them any of their meat. Again See the Bear felt empathy for their plight and cut off some meat, not acknowledging the refrain of displeasure from Left Hand. A few days later it was a wolf and then a fox. Each time Left Hand objected but See the Bear cut off more meat from the shrinking carcass.

Finally a hawk came to visit them seeking food. Left Hand had enough and stormed off to the village to tell them what was happening and to warn them that See the Bear was giving away their much needed meat. After Left Hand departed See the Bear gave some meat to the hawk who in turn suggested to See the Bear that they might find more plentiful food in the nearby lake country. Thankful for the advice See the Bear lugged what remained of the carcass back to the edge of the camp and stuffed it behind a tree, then went to confront the elders.

The elders asked him for his side of the story and he told them the truth. The elders were disappointed that the carcass would be smaller than needed but acknowledged the advice that food could be more plentiful in the Lake country as the hawk had suggested. So they went to fetch what remained of the carcass and were shocked to find that a full carcass was found behind the tree. Left Hand could not believe what he was witnessing. "I saw it being cut up and given away" he exclaimed!

As the elders and others stood with the carcass a ghostly white image of a large deer appeared before them. The deer said, "I am the deer that live in the forest. There are many of us and our flesh will give you strength. We ask that in return you always show your gratefulness for the gift of our life. If you do this we will always be here to help you. Generosity is a good thing to have for we are all travellers on this earth."

From then on after each deer was killed the hunters would pause for a quiet moment and then they would lay down a bundle of sacred sage as an offering. This practice continues to this day.

Jesus could be the ghost of the deer offering us his flesh as strength. He has showed us through the Eucharistic meal what it means to pause and to reflect in the quietness of our hearts on what he has done for us by laying down his life for our freedom. Jesus became the scapegoat that the community wanted exiled for the threats they felt to their way of life. Left Hand wanted See the Bear identified as the person who gave away the much-needed meat. The mainstream community of Jesus' day was so caught up in the rituals of life that they missed the opportunity to be generous of spirit. The blessings that Jesus taught his early followers were threatening to many and may continue to be so in our modern world. Despite this living with a generous heart is what we are called to model.

Tomorrow some of you may gather with family and friends to share a meal and to give thanks for blessings in your life. Others may prefer to spend the day in holy solitude, prayerfully reflecting on how God is sharing the bounty of living in freedom and forgiveness. Either way see if you can find the time to reflect on how God has blessed you this year, how God may be calling you to share blessings with others through a generous heart and how God continues to bring you out of exile and into the promised land.

May God's grace fill you, and may we be thankful and generous tomorrow and every day thereafter.

Amen