

Thanksgiving: The Rest of the Story

Psalm 100 Deuteronomy 8:7-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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After being bombarded with huge Christmas displays at every department store over the past several weeks, I knew that Thanksgiving could not be far away. Therefore, I wanted to share a few thoughts this morning about Thanksgiving and giving thanks.

We've all known the *traditional* story of the First Thanksgiving since we were in grade school. It goes something like this:

Fleeing religious oppression in their homeland, English Puritan immigrants, known as Pilgrims, sailed across the Atlantic in a ship called The Mayflower. They landed rather by accident in what is now called Cape Cod harbor and claimed the territory, calling it New Plymouth. They worked hard, fought plague, disease, a frigid cold winter, made friends with Squanto and the local tribe of natives, and produced "The Mayflower Compact." And they were fruitful and multiplied.

One year after their arrival, they organized a harvest festival after a bountiful crop in 1621 to which they invited the local native Americans, which they called Indians. (Today we call such gatherings "Potlucks.") Grateful to God for keeping them alive and away from the sins and evils of England, they ate and celebrated for three days. The very next year they all got together and celebrated again, and the year after that, and so on.

Picture in your mind, now, a traditional visual image snap shot of what that first Thanksgiving celebration at Plymouth might have looked like. For most of us that image includes the Pilgrims, dressed in their familiar Pilgrim way, and a group of American Indians, some sitting on their horses, some wearing long feathered headdresses, teepees in the background. There are large wooden tables with lots of food covering them from one end to the other - complete with roasted turkey, of course, and corn on the cob, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie.

Now, **one of the realities that comes with preaching from a progressive perspective is bursting the bubble of the familiar. Because when we look closely at the actual historical context of almost any familiar story, religious or secular,**

we realize that there is often as much myth and legend and half-truths as there is fact and reality. For we must remember that most historical accounts are written and recorded by “the winners”, therefore, from *their* particular viewpoint and perspective.

So yes, I'm afraid to report that the actual “First Thanksgiving” was indeed quite different from what we were taught to believe.

A few years ago I was looking for information on Thanksgiving, especially its origins. I found a website from a group located in Olympia, Washington called **The Center For World Indigenous Studies** (www.cwis.org). They provide a 16-page study guide of information debunking the image that most of us have in our minds of that first Thanksgiving. The main issue the author, a Native American, brings up is: **What do we teach our children - the same old familiar story and interpretation, with it's mixture of history and myth, or the more realistic, disturbing, and less historically distorted story and interpretation?**

The same dynamic falls into play for me each week as I preach from old familiar Bible stories. Believe me, preaching a time-honored, traditional interpretation of a scripture passage is a whole lot easier than digging into what modern progressive biblical scholars are uncovering about the origins and meanings of these stories in their original contexts. For if you're like me, it's hard, at first, to let go of the old familiar images of events, as taught in traditional Sunday school or in the classroom. **There is comfort in the familiar – even for us die-hard progressives.**

Yet at the same time, you, much like myself, may find a much deeper sense of meaning when you look at the familiar in a brand new way. And we're seeing a lot of history in a new way these days. Many believe that culture, society, and the church itself are in the midst of a major paradigm shift from how things have been perceived and done over the past 200 years. Many experts in this field of study claim that **we are on the cutting edge between what has been and what is emerging.** I believe that is a true assessment.

Lets look, now, at how this has affected how we perceive Thanksgiving, which by the way, was not declared as an official national holiday until Abraham Lincoln did so in the 1863 – over 240 years *after* that first gathering. Or, as legendary commentator Paul Harvey used to say, **“And now...for the rest of the story.”**

Back in 1970, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, Native Americans conducted a “Day of Mourning.” This event has been repeated with increased intensity each succeeding year. Many people living in the town of Plymouth today, as well as a large proportion of the Thanksgiving tourist population, resent what they feel to be the intrusion of these Native Americans upon the peaceful tranquility of Thanksgiving Day.

Resentment is a common response toward those who force us to reexamine all to familiar stories.

This notion of redeeming the familiar was made in a Thanksgiving sermon by Peter Gomes, back when he was the Chaplain at Harvard University. He writes:

Once we have been able to liberate Thanksgiving from the clutches of the Pilgrim mystique, as well as from the countercultural clutches of the protesters, and once we have been liberated from the 'count-your-many-blessings-name-them-one-by-one' routine, we will have made a significant step in that process of redeeming the familiar. An old story can give a new perspective, and we will be able to live in our time just as truly as our foreparents lived in theirs.

Gomes goes on to suggest that **giving thanks begins not with our successes and our blessings, and not even with ourselves. Rather, thanksgiving begins with God, and recognizing that God is with us and for us – no matter what our circumstances in life.**

If we are truly to be a part of the process of redeeming the familiar, we must be thankful that with God we are given second chances. When we miss opportunities, when we fail in the noble efforts that we make to succeed in life, we know that we are the children of a God who is loving and forgiving. Gomes writes, "**It seems to me that forgiveness between God and humanity, and between each other, is the true context for Thanksgiving.**"

So he suggests that we should not start by thanking God for our wealth, our health, or for our wisdom, but should rather simply **thank God that God is, that we are**, and that God's love shall be with us when time itself shall be no more.

But let's get back to that "First Thanksgiving." Let me share with you some of that information from **The Center For World Indigenous Studies**. Four quick points:

One. The Puritans in England were not just simple religious conservatives persecuted by the King and the Church of England for their unorthodox beliefs. They were also political revolutionaries who not only intended to overthrow the monarchical government of England, but who actually did so in 1649, with their leader Oliver Cromwell.

Two. The Puritan "Pilgrims" who came to New England were not simple refugees who decided to "put their fate in God's hands" in the "empty wilderness" of North America, as a generation of Hollywood movies taught us.

In any culture at any time, settlers on a frontier are most often outcasts, and many even fugitives, who in some way or other, do not fit into the mainstream of their society. Fitting well within the Puritans' mission, historians believe they had every intention of taking the land away from its native people to build their prophesied "Holy Kingdom."

Three. The Pilgrims were not just innocent refugees from religious persecution. Yes, they were victims of bigotry in England, but some of them were

themselves religious bigots by our modern standards. They saw themselves as fighting a holy war, and everyone who disagreed with them was the enemy. [That sounds remarkably familiar in today's worldwide political climate, doesn't it.] **This rigid fundamentalism was transmitted to America by the Plymouth colonists**, and it sheds a very different light on the loving "Pilgrim" image that most of us were taught to have of them.

This is best illustrated in the actual written text of the Thanksgiving sermon delivered at Plymouth in 1623, just two years after that first Thanksgiving. In that sermon, Mather the Elder gave special thanks to God for the devastating plague of smallpox which wiped out the majority of the local tribe, the Wampanoag Indians, who had been their benefactors, even saving their lives during that first cold winter. Mather praises God in that sermon for destroying "chiefly young men and children, the very seeds of increase, thus clearing the forests to make way for a better growth", i.e., the Pilgrims.

Four. A couple of generations later, after the balance of power had indeed shifted from the native indigenous people to the European immigrants, the children and grandchildren of these two peoples of that first Thanksgiving were striving to kill each other in the genocidal conflict know as King Philip's War.

At the end of that conflict most of the New England Indians were either exterminated or became refugees among the French in Canada. But it gets worse – much worse. **Many were sold into slavery in the Carolinas by the Puritans.** This is a fact. So successful was this early trade in Indian slaves that several Puritan ship owners began the practice of raiding the Ivory Coast of Africa for black Africans to sell into slavery to the colonies of the South, thus founding the American-based slave trade.

Well, I hope this information, which may be new information for many here this morning, has provoked and disturbed you. Perhaps the stories we tell our children in school and at home *should* be updated. **Perhaps the interpretations of many the stories we tell ourselves from the Bible should be updated as well,** now that we have a much better understanding of their original context and authorship. This continues to be a major goal of modern biblical scholarship and progressive theology.

By the way, just for fun, I want to close with a bit of a factual revision of that visual image of that First Thanksgiving, again based on what we know now.

Unlike the Great Plains-style Indians, the woodland-style Wampanoags didn't have horses, didn't wear huge feathered headdresses, and didn't live in teepees, but rather round-roofed houses called wigwams. And as far as the dinner menu was concerned, sweet potatoes had not even been introduced to New England yet; Indian corn was only good for making cornmeal, not eating on the cob; there were cranberries, but not sugar to make cranberry sauce; and the pumpkin pie was more like thick pudding, without a crust or whipped cream topping.

At that 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim's arrival, a Wampanoag descendent proclaimed:

Today is a time of celebrating for you - a time of looking back to the first days of white people in America. But it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People. When the Pilgrims arrived, we, the Wampanoags, welcomed them with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end. That before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a tribe. That we and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. **Let us always remember, the Indian is and was just as human as the white people.**

May we all remember on this Thanksgiving Day that **every person, everywhere, is just as human as the next. For all people are children of God.** I believe that trying to live the reality of this fact is a very real part of the familiar story here at College Hill.

And as we sit down at our Thanksgiving tables this Thursday, let us remember to simply thank God that God is, and that we are.

Amen.