

I have been thinking a lot about Thanksgiving during the last few weeks.

This was prompted by a recent conversation with a friend I hadn't spoken to for a few months. Just before my wife and I left Berkeley, California earlier this year, this particular friend was working on a project and wanted to know about Kim and I's journey with the church. We spent a few hours with her explaining our life story: how we'd met in a neo-monastic community, how we'd dedicated much of our 20s to working in the evangelical world, how we'd fallen out of that evangelical world and left church completely for over a decade, and how we'd eventually found our way back in via the Episcopal Church not quite ten years ago.

At the end of this long story, our interviewer asked us a new question: "You've spoken a lot about the importance of community and connection—but why Christianity? What keeps you coming back to the Christian faith?" The answer I came up with at the time (which my friend recently reminded me of) is what got me thinking about Thanksgiving.

I told our friend that at the end of the day, the things Christians put at the center of their life and worship simply make a great deal of sense to me—and then I immediately realized that I needed to clarify *which version* of Christianity I was talking about, because I actually think there's two major branches of the Christian family tree which put very different things at the heart of their life and worship. My own life story has essentially been finding my way out of the first category and into the second.

The first category, well characterized by evangelicals, sees the high point of Christian worship as the 'altar call'; a moment to 'accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior'. By this they mean that a person prays a prayer of repentance which brings about the immediate salvation of their soul—moving the person from the category of 'sinner bound for hell' into the new category of 'saved and bound for heaven'. This is the entire point of worship: get your soul saved and then spend the rest of your life convincing others to do the same.

The second category, well characterized by Episcopalians, sees the high point of Christian worship as the Eucharist—the meal which sustains us and connects us more deeply to God and one another. The literal meaning of the word 'Eucharist' is 'Thanksgiving'—we are fundamentally a Thanksgiving people. We see this practice of forming our lives around a profound Christ-shaped gratitude as the heart of what makes us Christian.

The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart expressed this idea in one of his sermons when he said:

"If a person has no more to do with God than to be thankful, that will suffice."

The difference between these two focal points for the Christian life is not minor. In the first category, the Christian life essentially becomes a transactional bargain: you live your life in a certain (seemingly restricted) way in exchange for a bigger eternal payoff. In the second category, you have already received what God offers—participation in the divine life itself.

You're now trying to figure out what sort of life to live in *response* to that divine gift. The only kind of life that ends up making sense is a life of thanksgiving.

We see a bit of this tension between worldviews in the Thanksgiving Gospel lesson from John. In tonight's reading, Jesus has just finished the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, where he miraculously transforms five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed 5,000 (and still have 12 baskets of leftovers). Jesus has now traveled some distance and he finds that the crowd is still following him. They want more of that miraculous food.

Our lesson begins when Jesus responds to those folks. These people have been fed extravagantly. They wonder if following Jesus around may not produce more ongoing banquets. In a sense, they're hoping for Thanksgiving dinner every day.

Let's not judge these people too harshly: the New Testament world was an extremely food insecure time and place. It's likely that most of the people in this crowd had rarely known what it's like to have a full belly. This is a time and place where most folks live perpetually with some degree of hunger, often on the edge of starvation if the year's harvest was poor.

What Jesus has just provided for them is truly incredible.

But Jesus says that following him is not really about looking for the next big banquet. It's not a transaction to earn a lavish reward, but it *is* a bit like the manna which sustained Israel in the wilderness.

If you go back to Exodus chapter 16 and read the story of God providing manna to the wandering Israelites, you'll notice something pretty striking: the miraculous manna which appeared each morning in the desert couldn't be stored. It went bad if you gathered up more than you needed for that particular day. You simply had to trust that there would be more the next morning. The manna economy was one where hoarding resources was not possible. It was about sustenance, not striking it rich.

Jesus says that he is *that* kind of food: come to him and you will be sustained. No more hunger, no more thirst. Jesus followers are not doing a bunch of religious stuff in hopes of a lavish future payoff; participation in the divine life is happening *right now*, sustaining us day by day. That present reality of the bread of life feeding us daily, is worthy of our thanksgiving.

These are the thoughts I've been thinking about Thanksgiving and Eucharist and Jesus and the Christian life...but it all got knocked in a new direction on Monday when Sue shared with me the music for tonight's service. I saw that she'd picked one of my favorite hymns from our hymnal: *Many and Great*.

This is a wonderful hymn, but also a very complicated one to be singing at Thanksgiving. I think it may also highlight the tension I've been describing.

*Many and Great* is a hymn of Dakota origin—in fact, it was originally known as ‘The Dakota Hymn’. It’s one of the few hymns in our hymnal which was written by a Native American. The author, Joseph Renville, was the son of a Dakota woman and a French fur trapper. He was a Congregational minister and missionary of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his version of the hymn was first published in the 1916 *Dakota Indian Hymnal*.

It’s a beautiful song of gratitude, giving thanks to God for the wonders of Creation and the gift of eternal life.

But the song rose to great importance among the Dakota because of a specific (and horrific) episode in American history.

In 1862, at the conclusion of the Dakota war with the United States, the Dakota people surrendered with the understanding that peace would be negotiated in a manner consistent with the end of a war. Instead, the US rounded up as many Dakota men as possible and put them on trial for murder. The military tribunal was hasty and the evidence for most of the accused was thin—but death sentences were quickly passed for 303 men. When Lincoln heard about this, he reduced the number of executions to 38—still the largest mass execution in US history. Lincoln was afraid that reducing the number any further wouldn’t serve as an adequate deterrent.

The date of the executions in 1862 was, ironically, my birthday—December 26. 38 men were marched to a specially-constructed gallows. As the hoods were placed upon their heads, they sang this song: *Many and Great, O God are thy works....*

According to witnesses, they joined hands with one another as they sang.

And then they were hung.

Shortly after this, evidence was found exonerating 2 of those executed—they’d had nothing to do with the fighting. One had simply stepped forward during the tribunal because he thought he’d heard his name called. In all likelihood, others among the executed were similarly innocent.

This is the context in which the words of thanksgiving in the song *Many and Great* became well known. In the face of abject despair, these Dakota men sang a song of Thanksgiving which connected them to one another and to God.

It did not change the outcome for them. It was not a transaction with God.

It was simply Thanksgiving: gratitude given to God for what one has been given, regardless of what comes next.

There is much for us to learn here.

In recent years, many Native American groups have expressed discomfort with the American holiday of Thanksgiving. They find the traditional portrayal of joyous Puritans and Indians

feasting in harmony to be deeply misleading about the dark realities of American history. It is a fact, after all, that the very youngest Puritan and Wampanoag children who ate together at that first Thanksgiving in 1621 would go on to massacre each other in King Philip's War in 1675.

There is a way in which Thanksgiving can wallpaper over the unpleasant truth, argue many Native American leaders. A way in which it can lead us further down the path of injustice and indifference.

We see shades of this kind of dangerous thanksgiving in the Thanksgiving lesson from Deuteronomy. There is something obviously positive and instructive in this image of the Israelites, freshly settled within the borders of the Promised Land, giving the first fruits of their harvest as an offering to God. But there is also something missing in this passage—any mention of the people the Israelites took the Promised Land *from*.

War and massacre and conquest were part of that story. There is danger when offering abundant thanks to God for the land becomes a way of sweeping that violent history under the rug.

Christians in America face a similar challenge: how do we celebrate Thanksgiving in a way which is honest in showing deep gratitude for all that we have been given *without* also turning the day into a festival which erases unpleasant truths? It is tempting to think that if we thank God earnestly enough for our blessings, we can stop worrying about how our nation came to possess our own land of milk and honey.

War and massacre and conquest were part of that story, too—and we cannot as Christians simply sweep it under the rug. Not while Native Americans continue to be numbered among the poorest and most neglected populations within our borders.

We can't use our prayers to wash the blood off of our history.

It is *that* mentality which I think our Native American siblings are cautioning us against. They are telling us that we need to seriously think and pray through the complicated history of our nation, to learn from that history and chart a better course. And we cannot do this if we instead opt to simplify or hide from it.

To be clear: I'm not telling anyone to hate America. I'm not telling anyone to shun Thanksgiving celebrations or Turkey dinners or pumpkin pie.

But I *am* suggesting that if our Thanksgiving becomes a tool to normalize the injustices of history and simply ease our consciences, we are right back to transactional thanksgiving—we are making it ultimately about *us*.

This fails to offer thanksgiving in the way the Eucharist calls us to do.

The way Jesus calls us to do.

In the Eucharist (our primary model of Christian Thanksgiving), giving thanks leads us to share our meal with our neighbor. It leads us to gratefully offer our lives back to God as a tool for transforming this world. It leads us more deeply into becoming the hands and feet of Christ, seeking out and challenging injustice in all forms.

*That* is why Thanksgiving is so central for Christians. Notice that even tonight, in our Evening Prayer where there's no Eucharist in sight, we will conclude our service with the words of the General Thanksgiving.

In it, we will pray:

give us such an awareness of your mercies,  
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,  
not only with our lips, but in our lives,  
by giving up ourselves to your service

*That* is the heart of Christian Thanksgiving.

That is why if we have no more to do with God than to be thankful, it will suffice.