

October 10, 2010 Harvest Thanksgiving Sermon

Lections: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Ps. 100; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35

I was interested in the origins of Canadian Thanksgiving; this weekend is Columbus Day in the United States. It has a particularly problematic history as does our Thanksgiving narrative myth, both of which exclude the First Nations' perspective. So I found an interesting website called Canadianinfo where I learned the following:

In 1578 the English navigator Martin Frobisher held a formal ceremony in what is now called Newfoundland to give thanks for surviving a long sea journey. In 1621 Pilgrims to Massachusetts celebrated their harvest in the New World. By the 1750's the celebration was brought to Nova Scotia by American settlers from the south. Around the same time French settlers arriving in Canada with Samuel deChamplain also held huge feasts of thanks. When the Seven Years War ended in 1763 the citizens of Halifax held a special day of thanksgiving. Loyalists who fled to Canada around the time of the American Revolution were used to a harvest celebration in their churches held every autumn. In 1879 Parliament set Nov. 6 as a day of thanks but it was later celebrated with Armistice Day following WWI on the Monday closest to Nov. 11. In 1931 the two days were celebrated separately and in 1957 a fixed date was finally set. That proclamation reads, 'a day of general thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed...to be observed on the second Monday in October.'

What we hear from scripture is that a thanksgiving celebration is much older. From the time of agricultural communities who were grateful for the bounty of the earth, a way was found to give praise by bringing the harvest into a holy place. During that celebration a history, a creed, was recited and the mandate was clear – share what you have with the Levites and the aliens in your midst. An ethic of generosity was at the center of the marking of time – God's time and humanity's blessing in relationship to others.

The land – even our little plot of land in the community garden tended by Pat and Joe – yields so much. Our Three Sisters garden of corn, beans and squash has come into this space not just for set design but to remind us to be grateful that the earth, Creator's good gift, sustains us. It should remind us of those places where the earth is in trouble and food is scarce. Our stewardship of the earth is an ethical challenge. We know this.

In the gospel of John, the disciples have followed Jesus across the sea of Galilee because they had been present at the Loaves and Fishes event, an exercise in redistributive justice which looked a lot like a miracle. And they want more of that – more signs, more manna, more feasting. What they want and what Jesus wants collide in a teachable moment. At least the author of this gospel asks/tells the community of faith to look more deeply than they have before. Look, he seems to be saying, at the source from which the bounty will come. Look to the core, the place of blessing. If the heart of the community will make a meal each time they gather, sharing what they have, extending the feeding continually they will be blessed in the sharing. The eucharist means thanksgiving and thanksgiving. It is a matter of seeing it.

Behind the food is the land – the mandate to steward its bounty. Green theology calls for a serious look at climate change which affects a web of creation. Modified crops, sustainability in land use, response to natural disasters – call for a deep ethic of action on behalf of the world.

The hospitality of this altar table is meant to help us think about the sacredness of sharing. Whether we distribute the foods gathered here each week, whether we support the peanut butter project in Lesotho, whether we make the connections between this table and all tables, the ethical opportunity to share is what is beneath our ritual of gratitude. The hospitality of the coffee hour is a direct extension of this table; the open Thanksgiving meal here tomorrow is a result of this open altar table.

The purpose is clear in a post-communion prayer from the Celtic liturgy: in gratitude, in deep gratitude for this meal, these people....ask much of us, enable much by us, expect much from us, encourage many through us...

Thanksgiving is not a date for a one time, once a year gratitude; it is an opportunity to think about how we might make meaning for ourselves and others, how we might live our faith so that none live hungry and thirsty. Amen+

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