

Thanksgiving

The first official Thanksgiving Day in this country was held in 1789, proclaimed by President George Washington at the request of the United States Congress. President Washington asked that the day “be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”

Thanksgiving Day did not become regularized until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War. That year President Abraham Lincoln issued his own proclamation, which begins:

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.

Remarkably, Lincoln went on to describe how peace and order and prosperity have been maintained “except in the theatre of military conflict.” (I imagine those living in the South had a rather different perspective.) Lincoln then invited his fellow citizens

to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens... and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

Note that neither Washington nor Lincoln says anything about food. There’s no mention of turkey, gravy, or pumpkin pie. They don’t tell us which kind of cranberry sauce they preferred. They also don’t say anything about shopping, including how many days will be left until Christmas. And as far as I can tell, they didn’t plan to spend the day watching football.

I’m being facetious, of course – to a point. However, I’m not going to head down the familiar direction of how we’ve lost the meaning of Thanksgiving, sort of a warm-up to the traditional holiday sermon of how we’ve lost the meaning of Christmas. When I read those old proclamations my mind went in a different direction. The words seem so formal, so strange, and the sentiment so foreign to our lives today. Lincoln wrote barely a hundred and fifty years ago. How can we possibly think that words written two thousand years ago still have relevance for us today?

It’s true that we hear biblical words much more frequently than presidential proclamations. For some of us, the Bible may be so familiar that we immediately jump to a favorite interpretation. Oh, right, the ten lepers. All were healed, but only one turned back to give thanks, and he was a foreigner. I know this story. We’re all supposed to give thanks to God. Oh, by the way, what time is it? I still have to get that pie in the oven.

But do we really know this story? How many of us have actually encountered a leper? And what about Samaritans? The *Good Samaritan* is part of our lexicon; we even have a Good Samaritan Home in west Davenport. Familiarity cuts off the freshness, the strangeness, of the story.

Or take the reading from Deuteronomy, where God leads Israel into a bountiful land where they will lack nothing. This *is* about food, food and water, lots of it, all provided by God. Read a little farther in Deuteronomy, however, and you'll find all of the awful things that will happen when God is forgotten, or more accurately, when the worship of God is perverted so that the strong can oppress the weak and the people can do whatever they want. What starts out as a wonderful passage is a setup for the dire predictions to come.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is remarkably clear for Paul. It's a good reading for today. He mentions sowing and reaping and harvest and thanksgiving and we can just see the cornucopia sitting on the table. Every church that raises money likes the verse that "God loves a cheerful giver." It's easy to tame these passages, to domesticate them, to make them as comfortable as sitting down to a big Thanksgiving dinner.

But what if we were to accept the fact that the stories are two thousand years old? What if we accept their strangeness and try to make them more real? The story about ten lepers might become a story about ten Ebola patients. Only seven of them survived, and of those seven only one gave thanks to God. Does that make it a little too real for comfort?

I know you didn't come here today to hear about Ebola. I know you came on this day, especially, to give thanks and praise to God. You are here because you are grateful. You may grieve for or regret what lies behind, and uncertain of what lies ahead. But for now, today, you are grateful that God has been with you, that God has sustained you through prayer and through people and most of all through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ.

I think that attitude of gratitude is what connects us with those Thanksgiving proclamations of past presidents. It's what connects us with the Deuteronomist, with the ten lepers. No, we don't know what their lives were like. Most of us don't know what it means to be cast out, or to be desperately hungry. But we do know how to be thankful, for what was, what is, and what will be. We know it with or without presidential proclamations. So let us be thankful today. Let us joyfully praise God in this Eucharist of thanksgiving. Let us do what our ancestors in the faith have done: give thanks for what God has done for us, whatever that may be.

[Thanksgiving: Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Luke 17:11-19.]