



University Christian Church

C. Kutz-Marks

Thanksgiving Odyssey

November 23, 2008

Deut. 8:7-18

Let me confess at the outset my ambivalence as we enter this season. My loving wife, bless her, will confirm this confession is necessary, as will my parents who still recall the Christmas that I essentially refused to participate in all the family celebrations. I can become a capital G grouch when it comes to Thanksgiving and Christmas... not because I don't like traditions, I do, really, but because the WAY we celebrate so often seems so contradictory to the theme.

So often we trivialize the reason for the season and find ways to ignore what my gut screams we should acknowledge...no, we should confess. That's the right word, "confess," because at once it implies our complicity... and our need for God. It seems to me that our ideals get so far separated from the realities of the celebrations and the traditions... that the traditions mock the ideals.

The best example of course, is that there is probably little more antithetical to love and compassion at the heart of the Gospel story of the birth of Jesus Christ, than the rapacious consumerism of a modern American Christmas celebrations. They clearly stand in opposition, yet we hold the two side by side and rarely admit the terrible tension.... Between what is and what should be. But this is just the most egregious example, Thanksgiving will do nicely to make my point.

After all, it was their honoring of God that drove those intrepid Pilgrim souls in the first place. It was July 21, 1620, a bittersweet day for some of the residents of Leyden, Holland. They were gathered on a windswept dock to hear parting words from their pastor, John Robinson. English Separatists who had fled England's persecution of their faith during the realm of Elizabeth I, they were anxious to emigrate to a new land across the vast ocean, a place known already as New England, where they could practice their faith in purity and freedom. Preaching a little more than a century after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, Robinson had already seen evidence of stagnation among the disciples of Luther and Calvin—of what could go wrong when Christianity succumbed to cultural twists of the Gospel message-- and he wanted his flock to avoid that at all costs in their new home across the sea. He wanted them to focus on only one thing: the Word of God and the will of God, and what would come forth from those wellsprings to meet the new needs they would surely have.

To that end, Pastor John Robinson admonished the Pilgrim's as they prepared to sail: "Brethren, we are now quickly to part from one another, and only the God of heaven knows whether I will see your face again. I charge you before God and His blessed angels that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. *I am verily persuaded that the Lord has more truth yet to break forth from His holy Word.*"

So 46 brave and determined folks left Holland on the ship "Speedwell", joining up in England with the ship, "Mayflower" and many more folks. On August 5 the 2 ships left England, only to have ship trouble and having to leave behind 18 people and forge ahead on only the Mayflower with 102 folks aboard. 41 of these were called "Saints" - sailing because of religious reasons, among others. But did you know there were 18 servants on

board, **belonging** to the Saints? Only a small step away from slaves. Such AMBIGUITY... such a mixture of high ideals, and poor meeting of them would come to characterize the Pilgrims' experience.

But especially for those who were deeply religious, who hoped to escape religious persecution in Europe and to purely practice their religion, every step of the way their expectations were confounded by a stern reality that seemed to teach them... **things will not be simply, easy, or nice.** Life will be filled with AMBIGUITY. The life you attain – and the spiritual maturity you reach...with the help of God – **is the life you are willing to forge in the furnaces of commitment despite this AMBIGUITY.**

So it would unfold that their sixty-day voyage landed them in Provincetown Harbor on November 11, 1620. Cold, wet and near starvation, these weary travelers stumbled into an abandoned Indian settlement and found corn that had been clearly set aside for spring planting. It wasn't their corn and they knew that by taking they might cause someone else to starve next year if they had nothing to plant. But these pious Pilgrims determined that their survival own outweighed their concern for the property of others...or anyone's future crops. **They stole ten bushels of the Native's seed corn.** AMBIGUITY.

But they did not find the area suitable for settling – or maybe they were just too ashamed to face those they'd robbed- so they got back on the Mayflower and sailed on to Plymouth.

Does it dim our respect for the Pilgrims to hear that their faith and discernment was so tested? Does it ruin our appreciation of the life that they were able to carve out of this trying new land? I hope not. May the fuller reality of their struggles give us a richer admiration for the imperfect, but deeply committed folk that they were. It is only fair to ask, too, who are we,

with our pantries full and food options without limit-- to judge them in their time of need,

Peter Gomes, who has served as Pastor of Memorial Church on Harvard's campus for 34 years, reflects in his book, *The Good Life*: "That first winter in New England was a terrible one for the Mayflower pilgrims, who were hardly prepared for the ferocity of the weather and the hard work of establishing a new colony. More than half their number died that winter in what they called 'the starving time,' where a ration of five kernels of corn was apportioned to each adult for the day's meal."

It was the next year, when a successful harvest was in, that they set aside a day for Thanksgiving. It's important to remember:

that just a few months before they were facing starvation, digging graves in the rocky soil for their children, wives, husbands;

that as they sat down to eat a Thanksgiving feast together.

Their hearts were still broken from the grief and trauma. One might have expected their leaders would call for a service of mourning than a service of Thanksgiving...**AMBIGUITY**... but there is a message here for us if we will search it out.

Gomes, who grew up in Plymouth, says that a local custom there is that on Thanksgiving Day, in the middle of the bountiful tables, five kernels of corn are placed on a red maple leaf at each place setting to remind people, who now enjoy a good bounty, of the "starving time" of long ago (p. 151).

Thanksgiving....the Thanksgiving story that has been passed down to us starts almost a year later, then. Hope was renewed by a bountiful harvest of corn. Squanto, the Pawtuxet Indian, helped the colonists to prepare the fields and plant corn. He also became a negotiator between tribes-people and the Pilgrims, helping to arrange the treaty that allowed the Pilgrims and

Indians to live in peace and to celebrate the meal which we commemorate on Thursday... The First Thanksgiving.

The famous feast was shared by about 50 colonists and 90 Wampanoag Indians. In the only surviving firsthand account of the meal, Edward Winslow describes it this way:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, among other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed upon our governor, and upon the captain, and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

The first official Thanksgiving- declared so by government- was declared by the Governor of the Mass Bay Colony in 1637. It is sad to say, but the AMBIGUOUS truth is that Gov. Bradford proclaimed the holiday **to commemorate the massacre of 700 Indian men, women and children during their annual harvest celebration**. According to Prof. Newell, himself a Penobscot Indian and recently the chair of the anthropology dept of the University of Connecticut, the Governor of Massachusetts ordained Thanksgiving Day for the next 100 years- a day for thanking God for victory in this battle with "the savages." AMBIGUITY.

President George Washington issued the first National proclamation for a day of thanks on November 26, 1787. In the same year, the Protestant

Episcopal Church announced that the church would celebrate a day of thanks giving on the first Thursday of November unless there was another day appointed by the civil authorities. Neither the church nor the state declared a day of Thanksgiving for years after that one time.

Not until the most dismal days of the Civil War.

President Lincoln, responding to pressure from Sara Josepha Hale, declared a day of national Thanksgiving. It seems that Ms. Hale's magazine was one of the most widely circulated women's magazines of the late 19th century. Ms. Hale had been publicly promoting a national day of thanksgiving for nearly 40 years! In the midst of the devastating Civil War she pushed harder for a nationally declared celebration of, and this is her word, "opulence." "Fasting," she warned in her magazine, "only accented the terrible condition of the country and the deeds of men...while feasting, on the other hand, exalted God and the culinary prowess of women."

Hmmm.

Each year for the next 75 years, the President of the U.S. formally proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day would be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. In 1939, Pres. Roosevelt changed it to one week earlier. Why? He wanted to help businesses during the depression by lengthening the Christmas shopping season by one week. AMBIGUITY...

Seems to me it has been lengthened a lot more than that. As one astute commentator put it, we have already entered the mushed Seasons of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas that he dubbed, "HallowThanksMas."

In 1942 Congress ruled that Thanksgiving would be celebrated annually on the fourth Thursday of November and declared it a legal federal holiday...

So here we are.... preparing for the fourth Thursday of November, 2008. 388 years of European American history between those Massachusetts Bay pilgrims and us.

Thanksgiving is a doorway through which we pass into the festive glow of the holiday season, and don't get me wrong, this is good. Thanksgiving has come to be a time of homecoming, a time of festivity and sharing. It is also a time of opulence and over indulgence. From football to turkey.... this is the kick-off to that time of year.... when our calendars can fill and our bellies can fill up at a rate surpassed only by the rate at which our pockets empty out....ⁱ

Here is my central point, friends, our celebrations can either give voice to the ideals by which we are trying to live our lives.... or they can be dismal contradictions to those values. We choose, each year how we celebrate- and what we affirm.

Holidays can be full of joy and fulfillment and at the same time show conscious awareness of the realities, which confront our world. There is a festive way to give thanks and still be mindful of the strife in the Middle East, the struggles of native peoples, the homelessness in our city streets.... of wars....economic and military. We can create a Thanksgiving which is not only warm and memorable, but one which is also sensitive to the whole of our human family and more caring of our earth.

But it will always be wrapped in AMBIGUITY... that frustrating mixture of ideal and reality that we are destined to navigate. My prayer for us, is that with the same kind of faith, the same kind of trust in God that the Pilgrims evidenced in even being able to celebrate that first Thanksgiving, that their spirit might come alive in us, too, and we join with them, and St. Paul and the Saints of the ages in words of Philippians Chapter 4,

4 Rejoice in the Lord **always**; again I will say, Rejoice....

6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen

ⁱ Some of this material and this particular phrase comes from a sermon by colleague Rev. Elaine Pesuha delivered November 24, 2002.