

Happy Thanksgiving!

Our autumn celebration today of Thanksgiving here in America is actually connected to the ancient traditions of many cultures around the world of giving thanks at harvest time. There is the Jewish festival of Succot (sue-coat), which is a week of celebration in the fall, also known as the "Feast of Ingathering" that the Bible describes as a day to give thanks to God at the completion of the fruit harvest. The ancient Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks also had a day of thanksgiving following the harvest. And the Pilgrims themselves, being of English descent, would have celebrated the Harvest Festival, which stems all the way back to pagan times in Europe and later involved the church with offerings of food including food for the hungry. Native American tribes in America had their own harvest festivals of giving thanks as well. And so we are in good company and in the Episcopal Church, Thanksgiving is even a Major Feast Day of the church. The act of giving thanks, of counting our blessings, and expressing gratitude to God is an important practice in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

We are urged in our Psalm from today to:
Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
go into his courts with praise;
give thanks to God and call upon his Name.

And we read in our lesson from Deuteronomy today:
"The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me."

The deliverance by God of the Jewish people out of slavery and into the promised land is cause for thanksgiving in this passage and throughout the Bible and in history. We read in our Gospel today about the manna that God supplied for God's people in the desert as well- and you may recall that God also provided quail for the people to eat

during their time in the desert before entering the Promised Land.

Our Thanksgiving feast in America is, in many ways, connected to this story and tradition. My Bible professor told us that when the Pilgrims arrived here, they not only saw this new world as the Promised Land, but, when they found wild turkeys running around, they associated them with the quail of the Bible - only these quail were huge! For them, this land was an extravagant blessing from God.

And while the precise historical details of that first Thanksgiving feast between the Pilgrims and Native Americans have been lost, it is a beautiful and compelling reminder of what could be. And certainly, the Pilgrims, who were Puritans and people of faith, understood well that they had been blessed by God. That, as we say at our 7:30 service every Sunday, "All things come from Thee O God, and of Thine own have we given thee." All we have is from God.

And the practice of giving thanks is central to our spiritual health and well-being. And yet, and I know this is true of me, we tend to go through life asking God for things far more than we give thanks for what we have. In other words, our list of requests is generally much longer than our list of thanksgivings. Just look at the Prayers of the People. Every church I've been in has long lists of prayers, but rarely are these prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude. When I worked at St. John's in Ohio, the Rector of the parish used to insist that people say something when we go to the thanksgiving section of the Prayers of the People during worship. In fact, he was so insistent about it, that there would sometimes be painfully long pauses of silence while he waited for people in the congregation to verbalize some prayers of thanksgiving. He believed we shouldn't be asking God for things without also thanking God for things. What happened is all that we all started thinking of things we could say just to avoid the embarrassing silence! But, in fact, it was wonderful

reminder and habit to get into...praying with gratitude.

But why are we so quick to ask for things and slower to give thanks? Why is gratitude so often an afterthought? And how does that impact us and those around us?

Jesus has given us at least one remedy for this in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Eucharist and Jesus alludes to it in our Gospel reading today. Eucharist is a Greek word which simply means "thanksgiving" and our Prayer Book calls it "The Great Thanksgiving." In the Eucharist, we recall all that God has done throughout history to save and restore us...it really is one long prayer of thanksgiving to God if you pay attention. The weekly habit of giving thanks in the Eucharist reminds us over and over again of what God has done and why we are called into deep gratitude. So what are some ways we can incorporate more gratitude into our lives in a daily way – beyond Thanksgiving Day? We could take time in prayer every day to give thanks to God and not just ask for things. We could take inventory of all the blessings in our lives, especially when we start to feel discouraged. When we hear or get good news, we could immediately thank God silently or aloud for it. We could say thank you to others every chance we get, and catch people doing something good and notice it. We could come to worship frequently and let our hearts be turned in gratitude throughout the service, during the Prayers of the People, and especially at the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist. We could show gratitude in our actions: by giving of our time, talent, and treasure in service and gratitude to God, remembering that all we have really is from God. And as we do these things, we will find that our attitude about life changed, and we will become people filled with deeper joy and gratitude.

As John Newton wrote in the last line of his famous hymn "Amazing Grace," even "When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun." My friends – we have been blessed by

God, for all things come of Thee - and we could sing of God's love and mercy forever and we will never run out of things to thank God for.

Thanks be to God!