

Thanksgiving Memories: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Norwalk Community Thanksgiving Service, New Life Lutheran Church, November 20, 2016, Year C

What is your favorite Thanksgiving memory? Was it a time with your family, just you and the kids, still young; or that time everyone came back home, and the house was filled again with noise and grandkids. Was it when you were a child, and you gathered at Grandma's table. Or that time you used the time off for a family trip to Disney World.

Or that first thanksgiving on your own, shared with your family of choice. Or that time you skipped the meal and volunteered at the mission instead, sharing a meal with those in need. Maybe it was that time you were the one in need, and someone shared with you--a kindness you will never forget.

Growing up, my family never had a lot of Thanksgiving traditions of our own. We lived in Northwest Florida, and our big extended family was in Southern Missouri. They'd have big thanksgiving meals, but we were rarely able to travel and be with them, so most of our Thanksgivings were shared with our family of four, joined by others who were also away from their extended families. Some years we'd be guests at someone else's home, and some years we'd have guests in our home.

But it didn't matter whose table we sat at, there was always plenty. Turkey, ham, and even sometimes grilled steaks. There was always stuffing and dressing, and green bean casserole, and sweet potato casserole with more sugar than sweet potatoes, and hash brown casserole--we southerners love our casseroles. Oh, and our pies. Always lots of pies. Pumpkin, Pecan, Chocolate, Chocolate Cheese, Apple....

It didn't matter who we gathered with--there was always plenty to share and plenty to be thankful for.

What do you remember? What is your favorite thanksgiving memory?

The tastes. The smells. The sounds of family and friends. The family prayer. The sharing of one thing you're thankful for that year.

Maybe it's simply the time off, or the football, or the post-dinner nap, or the post-dinner movie, or the shopping, or it finally being okay to put the Christmas music on shuffle while you deck the halls with boughs of holly.

For so many reasons--we love Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving is a unique holiday, a day of celebration that people from all walks of life celebrate--that brings us across the lines that usually divide us. We have various religious holidays, but Thanksgiving we all hold in common in our nation.

On that day, we *all* stop to remember our common story, the story on which we founded a nation. The story of Pilgrims--strangers--in a new land, who after much hardship, celebrated their first successful harvest, joined by the Wampanoag tribe, crossing lines that were once as wide as an ocean, now together at a common table--giving thanks.

It's the story of the harvest, of abundance, of the miracle of seeds becoming plants becoming produce becoming a feast. Of people, once divided, now together around a common table of celebration. This is the story we remember. This is why we give thanks.

But this story we remember is but one in a long line of stories scattered throughout human history--stories that mark our journey of faith from the beginning until now.

Earlier we read a story from Deuteronomy. This ancient book from Jewish scripture tells the story of the people of Israel standing on the edge of the promised land. As they are about to enter after years of wandering in the wilderness Moses gives them one final, farewell message. The book of Deuteronomy is that message.

Standing on the cusp of a new land, a land of plenty, where they can settle and build homes and cities and a great nation filled with abundance--on the edge of this new land, Moses calls them to remember and to give thanks. To remember their story. To remember the journey, how they got to the place where they now stand.

“When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, as an inheritance to possess,” Moses tells them, “and [when] you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you” and you shall give it as an offering to the Lord.

When you're settled in the new land, and the pressures of life start to come, and you start worrying about building homes, and mowing your yards, and planting your gardens, and fixing your furnaces, and plowing the snow, and getting the kids to school on time, and paying off your mortgage, and all the many encumbrances that come with living in a land of plenty--do not forget to stop and remember.

Bringing the first fruits of their harvest, the people were to present them to the priest in the temple as an act of worship, and when the priest took their thanksgiving basket, they were to speak aloud their story.

Let us now read together the words on the screen, the story that the people of Israel told:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw

our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 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.”

They remember their story. And in remembering, they give thanks in worship.

But it can't just end with worship. Where's the feast?! Where are the casseroles and the pies and the turkey?! You can't have thanksgiving without a feast!

So Moses tells the people that after presenting their offering of first fruits, they should gather together for a feast. It sounds like a big 'ole traditional thanksgiving feast, with a table full of food and people, but it's more than that. Moses tells them that when they gather, do not forget to invite “the Levites and the aliens who reside among you,” and together at one big table, they shall...“celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.”

For those of us who need a little refresher on Jewish history, I'll remind us who the Levites were. Yes, they were the tribe that would provide the priests, but they were also the only tribe that was not given a land of their own. They were, essentially, homeless. And if they are to survive, it will be because of the generosity of those around them.

And what about these “aliens who reside among you”? Not little green men, but refugees and immigrants, foreigners in a strange land, with no homes of *their* own, those who have been pushed out, or fled for safety, or simply were wandering Arameans like their Jewish ancestors.

When you gather in your homes to give thanks, don't forget those who have no home. See, Thanksgiving is great and all. But it can't just end in worship. There must be a feast. But not just any feast--a God feast--where all are invited, and those without a home are brought into your home, and everyone is fed, and all are welcome.

Why? Well, because of the story. Because “A wandering Aramean was our ancestor...but God provided bounty.”

What story will we tell this thanksgiving? What will we remember?

In the Gospel text I read a moment ago, the people got the story all wrong. They saw Jesus miraculously feed over 5,000 people from 5 loaves and 2 fish in the wilderness, and they certainly caught the symbolism and remembered that story they were told of their ancestors being miraculously fed by manna in the wilderness. Remembering, they

should've given thanks. They should've told others about this Jesus they encountered in the wilderness.

But, instead, they chase Jesus down. They try to hustle another meal out of Jesus. They saw the miracle of God's abundance, and held their hands back out and asked, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Which is a nice way of saying, "how can we learn to do a magic trick like that!"

They remembered the story wrong. They thought it was Moses who fed their ancestors in the wilderness, and they thought Jesus had magical powers, and they wanted to learn the secret so they could perform the same trick.

But Jesus says to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

I don't know about you, but it bothers me, when I look around our world and I see so much abundance, and yet so much need. It bothers me that in our own city, families live on the edge. And it bothers me that though we share a common story, we are still so divided. And it bothers me that people, facing persecution and horrible violence, are forced from their homes and have to rely on the generosity of other people in order to survive.

And I wish we could learn some trick that could make it all go away. Find some new land of plenty, some miraculous manna in the wilderness. I wish we could learn some trick, and then the suffering would be gone.

But we already know the trick, don't we? We've known it all along.

The trick--the solution to it all--is called Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving that's rooted in memory. Remembering our story--where we came from. Remembering all that God has done for us.

Remembering that this bounty is not just for us, but it is meant to be shared. That these tables we sit at, always have room for one more. That this God we serve is the God of the wandering Arameans, and refugees, and immigrants, and Levites, and of you and me, and of our neighbor--no matter how different we may be.

Remembering that our God is the one who welcomes us into the land of plenty, and then calls on us to make sure that everyone--everyone--has enough.

This is the work of Thanksgiving. It can't just end in worship. And it can't end with a feast. Thanksgiving must send us out into the world, as we share God's bounty with all.

What would happen if we told *this* story this Thanksgiving? How would the world be different if we put down our fear and indifference, and instead, chose thanksgiving? This day, this week, and always, may we give thanks for God's good gifts.

May we sit around tables filled with feasts shared by family and friends,
and with those who need family and friends.

May we celebrate God's bounty,
and then, may we go out into the world with ever thankful hearts,
Making room so that everyone may have a seat at God's great table of abundance.

Amen.