

Radically Thankful

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I'm going to be honest with you – Thanksgiving once had a “lustre” to it, the whole thing. I was filled with thankfulness for the delicious turkey dinners, and extended family coming together. It was as simple as that, until time passed.

But, as the history of colonization came into clearer focus, I have come to realize that my youthful experience of thankfulness was missing some truth, some integrity. You see, in my mind's eye, those first settlers had a grand potluck with the Indigenous people in what came to be known as New England. I thought that this tradition I inherited was built on a foundation of mutuality. The truth of that first potluck, historians say, was probably that it was a very uncomfortable meal. After all, these strange European guests invited themselves to the land. It would be logical to assume there was great anxiety, and that expressions of gratitude might have been disingenuous.

Please bear with me – I'm needing to be honest on this holiday weekend.

History has revealed that the European settler spirit was one of entitlement – that is, they needed a great deal of assistance from indigenous people, but with very little given in return.

I'm musing aloud here, but perhaps we might go deeper this Thanksgiving weekend, to finding not just things to be thankful for, but a radical sense of gratitude. Perhaps today's Gospel story of 10 lepers who are healed might hold some wisdom, helping to guide us into deeper gratitude. It is interesting to note that the storyteller Luke sets this between Galilee and Samaria – between these regions, on the border.¹ I'm thinking right now about the infamous Roxham Road, the path followed by desperate asylum seekers between New York State and Quebec, a danger space between regions that has now been closed.

There was that one leper who happened to be Samaritan who turned around and praised God for their healing. Of course, it is never an incidental reference to a person in the Bible who is of Samaritan ancestry. This is one of the many “inversion” stories told by Luke where the Jewish listeners of ancient time would have seen that Samaritan as repugnant. But Jesus surprises the listeners, flipping their sense of what is conventional wisdom, who is worthy and who is not. This foreigner, the Samaritan leper is the hero, the one who expresses gratitude, and the Jewish Rabbi Jesus commends him for radical gratitude.

Jesus is regularly going into those between places, isn't he? He takes great risks going off the safe path, defying the etiquette of his time, and celebrating people who normally would be pariahs to his disciples.

¹ See Commentary on Luke 17:11-19 by Francisco J. Garcia, October 9 2022. Workingpreacher.org.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-3/commentary-on-luke-1711-19-5>

What might be a thanksgiving tradition Jesus would suggest? What would Jesus do if he were invited to your place, or mine, this weekend?

Who would be invited to that dinner? Who is the Samaritan, the foreigner who is yours and my neighbour. To figure out who that is, imagine that Samaritan, a gentile who is not at all familiar with Jewish purity laws, at dinner with Jesus and Jewish friends who practice very particular cleanliness and purity rituals.

Imagine a modern meal with invited guests who do not fit with the decorum of the traditional special meal. Moreso, imagine that the guest cannot remember the last time they were invited into a home to enjoy the smells and tastes of a meal like this one. Can you imagine that space, that dinner table, where you hold off on giving rules or conditions, just an unconditional message of welcome to enjoy? That could be a chaotic, anxious, experience.

We should remember, all of us who are ancestors of the European settlers, that the settlers who came to Turtle Island were uninvited guests, long ago, to a meal that was certainly awkward, too. In gratitude for my ever-evolving understanding of history, I sought out an indigenous tradition that might make my Thanksgiving, our Thanksgiving, a bit more authentic – to help us to be ever more radically thankful like that Samaritan leper.

Tasha Tanya Jacko, an Anishinaabe woman living in Chilliwack, B.C., is now taking Thanksgiving back, so to speak, by using her weekend feast to honour her culture.² A highlight, for her, is the Three Sisters' Soup – consisting of hominy corn, squash, and beans. The soup has its origins in a creation story shared by her people.

Tasha says, "I like to teach it to my children, because our responsibility as a community and parents is to pass down the oral teachings".

The Three Sisters Creation Story goes like this:³

This is the Iroquois Legend of the Three Sisters. The term "Three Sisters" emerged from the Iroquois creation myth. It was said that the earth began when "Sky Woman" who lived in the upper world peered through a hole in the sky and fell through to an endless sea. The animals saw her coming, so they took the soil from the bottom of the sea and spread it onto the back of a giant turtle to provide a safe place for her to land. This "Turtle Island" is now what we call North America.

Sky woman had become pregnant before she fell. When she landed, she gave birth to a daughter. When the daughter grew into a young woman, she also became pregnant (by the West wind). She died while giving birth to twin boys. Sky Woman buried her daughter in the "new earth." From her grave grew three sacred plants – corn, beans, and squash. These plants provided food for her sons, and later, for all of humanity. These special gifts ensured the survival of the Iroquois people.

² Story: CBC News British Columbia Courtney Dickson Oct 11, 2021 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/indigenous-gratitude-thanksgiving-1.6207443#:~:text=Canadian%20Thanksgiving%20started%20in%201859,divine%20destiny%20as%20a%20nation.%22>

³Northeastern State University <https://nsuok.edu/heritage/three-sisters-legend.aspx>

Scientists unanimously point out how this thousands of years old tradition of Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island is genius, for:

...interplanted pole beans and squash with corn, using the strength of the sturdy corn stalks to support the twining beans and the shade of the spreading squash vines to trap moisture for the growing crop. Research has further revealed the additional benefits of this "companion planting."⁴

I'm grateful for traditions that evolve.

I'm grateful for a more authentic history that informs my Thanksgiving, and my prayer is that we will listen to the voice of Jesus calls us to invite the Samaritan to dinner, whether the feast is big or small. May we remember that Jesus embraced awkward encounters. Amen.

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