

## BECOME THANKSGIVING

TEXT: Psalm 65

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 21, 2021*

Back on Mother's Day I shared my personal struggles with that holiday. As I talked to many of you out under the tent after that service, I found that almost every little group that gathered was reflecting on their own...well... "mother stuff," for want of a better term. Which is healthy and how we get rid of the weight of that stuff—we share it and thereby lighten the load.

I have Thanksgiving "stuff," too, and, since I'm probably not alone in that, I'm going to do some personal sharing this morning in the hopes that, like with Mother's Day, it might give you permission to make some peace with your own or at least realize you're not the only one. I also have a second purpose this morning. Two years ago, I made a promise to a friend, and this morning is the last window for me to fulfill that promise. So I'll wrap up with that.

I'm sure some of my issues with Thanksgiving are common to a number of you, the most obvious of which is the Normal Rockwell image of the happy family around a table, sharing love, laughter, and abundant food contrasted with what so many experience. Rockwell's image was mostly my reality through my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Throw in a politically divided family and an uncle who liked to take a peaceful time around the table, suddenly say, "So, what do you think about capital punishment?" and then sit back with a grin and watch the fur fly and you have my Thanksgiving life for my first 21 years.

By my 22<sup>nd</sup> year, my father's chair was empty, and then others. Then I was moving around the country to follow my husband's army and then academic career. And then he left, and in the past 30 years I've spent probably a third of my Thanksgivings more or less by myself. When you also hate cooking, that painting looks more like Andy Warhol than Normal Rockwell. But I always tried to make it work. I served in soup kitchens, visited in prisons, or sometimes just stayed home and pretended that it wasn't Thanksgiving or saw friends on a different day and pretended it was Thanksgiving then. In my mother's last years, we gathered in the nursing home, taking turns feeding her.

Going through difficult Thanksgivings of all kinds has helped me grow, although I tell God frequently that I would really rather learn such things by reading a book. It's allowed me to more fully empathize with others in similar circumstances. It's also taught me that it's emotionally healthy to recognize, name, and allow ourselves to feel what we feel. Having a rotten Thanksgiving is not a sign of spiritual bankruptcy, although there are plenty of well-meaning people ready to lay that trip on you and tell you to hunt for just a few more blessings.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. But we can only be thankful in all circumstances, after we've acknowledged all the circumstances of life—the bad as well as the good. Pretending that bad things are somehow good things in disguise is something Christians are good at; but it doesn't heal or help in the long term, and it's not what the Bible is really asking of us. For heaven's sake we have an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations! Paul is asking us to learn to be thankful **IN** all circumstances, not **FOR** all circumstances.

Psalm 65 is helpful here, as I described to the children. Ultimately, thanksgiving isn't something we say or feel. In the end, it's not even about what we do. It's about becoming the person who is spiritually healthy enough to fulfill God's loving purpose in the world. A grape is thankful just by becoming a grape. Just as Jesus described himself as the bread of life, we are meant to provide the good food for the soul that will nourish and heal the nations. Certainly our actions help accomplish that; but only if those actions spring from our authentic, God-cultivated selves.

Psalm 65 describes God's care for the earth as producing an abundant harvest, something that brings joy to the earth itself. The meadows feed the flocks, the valleys grow abundant grain for the people, and they sing for joy at the privilege of becoming what God created them to be. That's their thankfulness; just as it's ours.

It's finding and fulfilling our place in creation and our own particular role in our families, our communities, and the world. As we say when we bless the animals, "May you be all that God created you to be." That is the ultimate expression of our thankfulness. In the end, we become thanksgiving and the fruit of our lives nourishes the world.

But that is the culmination of our spiritual growth, not the beginning. Before we get there, we have to go through the bumpy, faulty, joyful, and terrifying ups and downs of our lives. We learn to acknowledge both the good and the bad within us; to be thankful and to recognize and confess our sins; and, in learning to love our imperfect selves, we develop empathy for other imperfect souls who are on the same wild ride that we are.

We judge less and love more; we stop pretending that everything's fine when it isn't; and we're fearless in admitting our struggles and confessing our sins because we've learned that when all else might fail, God's love for us remains just as strong as it ever was. There is no divide so large that God's love cannot bridge it. We just need the courage to dive into the gap and take it there.

All of which is easy to say; but the promise I need to keep this morning is an example of how hard it can be for us to pull off. In recent years, just when I thought I had the crappy holiday thing all figured out, God apparently decided I was ready for a bigger challenge. Because—shocker—it's not all about me. The whole reason I have to deal with my own baggage is to make me more helpful to others—to become that nourishing food. But others can be so...well...other. And I have to figure out how to love them anyway. I think I'm bringing them sweet grapes and they're saying, "Ewww, Brussel sprouts."

So I'm not sure what you'll think you're getting in the second part of this sermon, but if I can't keep this promise, then I may as well hang up my robe and go home. So I hope if you're troubled by it, you can just feed it to the dog under the table with maybe just a bit of curiosity about how I came to this place.

It began about 20 years ago when I was preparing for a six-week sabbatical in Scotland and decided to research my Robertson roots. As I followed my family tree, I came across a name I recognized, discovering that I was a descendant of Mayflower passenger Stephen Hopkins.

Well, I thought that was pretty cool. I joined the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants and became a member of their board. That put me in the swirl of preparations underway even back then for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Mayflower in Plymouth in 2020. And then in 2007 I actually moved to Plymouth. When I stood at the edge of Plymouth harbor, I was transported back, as if something in my DNA could somehow remember coming ashore there in 1620.

I knew that the story of the First Thanksgiving I'd been taught in school was really a lot more nuanced than that. And quickly I learned that much of it was just flat out wrong. But okay, I know history has always been written by the winners. I was willing to learn the bigger picture. I was pleased when an annual meeting at the Mass Society of Mayflower Descendants had a Native American woman as the keynote; but I was really surprised to learn that it was the first time a Native person had spoken at the gathering. Why wasn't there a more active connection?

As I became more involved, I learned more about the tensions between the groups. The last time a Native American had been invited to speak, the person had shared the pain of their people. The

Mayflower folks heard stories about their ancestors and the effects of their actions through the centuries that they were not ready or willing to absorb.

I learned that Native Tribes mark Thanksgiving as a National Day of Mourning, a tradition that began in 1970 and continues to this day with a gathering at noon in Plymouth every Thanksgiving. The landing of the Mayflower in 1620 was the beginning of 400 years of ascendancy for my European ancestors but the beginning of the theft, genocide, and intentional destruction of Native peoples, language, and culture from sea to shining sea.

There were tensions with the Mayflower Descendants because the group was hesitant even to acknowledge that the privilege afforded to most of us with that ancestry today was achieved at an inhumane cost to the thriving First Nations who had lived here for 10,000 years prior to our arrival. I did a lot of reading. And listening. And praying. I began to realize that my proud ancestry came with responsibility and obligation, not only to preserve the stories of the past, but to somehow help ease the tensions in the present.

All the way down the chain, even the poorest members of my family have had advantages and opportunities that were taken by law from the members of the Wampanoag Tribe whose ancestors once met mine on Cape Cod and in Plymouth Harbor. How did something that began so well go so wrong? What might God be asking of me, as a Christian minister and a Mayflower descendant? Was there even one tiny bit of healing, empathy, and care that I could bring? If I could face up to the full humanity of my ancestors—saints and sinners both—would it let others do the same?

And then the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary was upon us. I was honored to be chosen to give the invocation at a large anniversary event with international exposure in the fall of 2019. I asked if I might share that invocation time with a Native person—which was a bigger ask of any Native American than I really understood. But a Wampanoag woman came forward who was willing to share the invocation with me; she from her tradition and me from mine.

I structured the prayer around the sections of the Lord's Prayer, which of course includes a line of confession and request for pardon in "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." I thought, here's a tiny chance. The rest of the three-minute prayer is all pride and hope. Maybe there can be at least a bit of acknowledgement...400 years later...that we Europeans were not our best selves in the decades and centuries that followed. I penned the following words for my part of that section of the prayer:

"And yet, O God, it is not pride in our accomplishments that will wash away our sins. We confess that we have not honored our treaties; we have too frequently exalted ourselves, bringing harm to others of your children; we gladly accepted the bounty of Native peoples but then refused to share the salt of their tears. We need your cleansing, O God."

I had to cut that part of the prayer. We want this to be a celebration, they said. People have worked really hard. We have a whole year of 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations coming up in 2020; we can work out something like that for a different event. This isn't the time. I promised the Native woman, who had risked the wrath of her community to share that invocation with me, that I would make sure that happened. At some 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, I told her, I would speak those words, even if I had to beg my way into a random pulpit somewhere to do it and create my own event.

Little did any of us know that Covid would take an axe to all of those plans. All those other celebrations were cancelled or indefinitely delayed. By then I had moved to Sandwich, buying a home just a few miles from the bit of land left to the Wampanoag in the town of Mashpee. When I sold that house to move here, I donated 4% of that sale to a Wampanoag project to restore their

language—1% for every century that my ancestors have lived here—as my personal kind of reparations. I had lived and made a profit on their land.

I began to plan a community Thanksgiving Eve service for 2021 when I could fulfill my promise to speak the confession I had written. This Thanksgiving is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that first harvest feast after the first deadly winter of 1621, the last day of the anniversary remembrances. Surely Covid would be over by Thanksgiving 2021.

Spoiler alert, Covid is not over. There is no service Wednesday night. Which leaves this morning for me to do literally the least that I can do by using my position both as Christian clergy and as a Mayflower descendant to just dip a toe in my sin of not being more mindful or curious or informed of the ways my celebrations have not taken the pain of others into consideration. For focusing so much on me and my ancestors that the footprints of those who walked this land for over 10,000 years could be dusted away, as if civilization began here a mere 400 years ago.

Everyone meant well; I mean to cast no blame outside of myself; and I don't know if the fruit of my repentance comes to you as grapes or Brussel sprouts. But I do know I had to keep my promise to a woman who was willing to walk into the fire with me for the hope of even a slight recognition of her pain. And on this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that survivors' meal, I offer back what is just a tiny kernel as a sign of good will; to speak now what could not be spoken then in hope for a future where the First Peoples and European immigrants might become thanksgiving together.

“And yet, O God, it is not pride in our accomplishments that will wash away our sins. We confess that we have not honored our treaties; we have too frequently exalted ourselves, bringing harm to others of your children; we gladly accepted the bounty of Native peoples but then refused to share the salt of their tears. We need your cleansing, O God.” Amen.