

## GIVING THANKS IN HARD TIMES

**A sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
University Public Worship at Stanford Memorial Church  
November 24, 2002**

It's only four days until Thanksgiving now: the great American holy day -- a time to be home with our families, or gathered together with friends, if we can't easily get home. Traditionally there's lots of good food, catching up, slowing down, and relaxing. We count our blessings, and we give thanks. Yet, these are hard times. We're in the midst of a new age of terrorism and an economic recession that's had a devastating impact on many. President George W. Bush's first Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, a year ago, spoke in the first paragraph of "the painful aftermath of the September 11 attacks" and "our resolute war on terrorism."<sup>i</sup> He went on to explain how Americans "always have reason to hope...despite great adversity," referencing the many Pilgrim deaths before the first Thanksgiving in 1621, George Washington's army's suffering at Valley Forge in 1777, and Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation "with the Nation embroiled in a bloody civil war" in 1863.<sup>ii</sup>

President Clinton's Thanksgiving proclamation in the year 2000 stands in striking contrast to President Bush's. The first paragraph reads: "We have much to be grateful for this Thanksgiving Day. Our Nation is free, prosperous, and at peace. The remarkable growth in human knowledge and technological innovation offers real hope for defeating age-old enemies of humanity: poverty, famine, and disease. Our dynamic economy continues to generate millions of new jobs, and as wages rise and unemployment falls to its lowest level in more than a generation, millions of American families are sharing in the bounty of this great land for the first time."<sup>iii</sup>

This is the year 2002, not 2000. We gather with our families and friends chastened and humbled by new realities. Our opening hymn, "We Sing Now Together,"<sup>iv</sup> not only has us "rejoicing in goods which the ages have wrought," but also singing of the labor, sorrow and pain of martyrs and heroes as they befriended the oppressed. In the past I've worried that Thanksgiving had become the bland holiday. What does it really mean? Turkey and stuffing? Cranberries and pumpkin pie? Sitting in front of the TV watching a football game? Instead, I think we should consider Thanksgiving the most robust of holidays. For it really emerges out of a backdrop of extreme pain and suffering. Its celebration should be seen in terms of the miracle of survival and the grandeur of the human spirit in the face of incalculable odds. Modern America wasn't born beautiful, with "amber waves of grain" and "fruited plains;" nor have we yet seen "alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears."<sup>v</sup> Thanksgiving should be a time of awe for staggering sacrifices made, and for brave dreams -- still unfulfilled -- of liberty and justice for all.

Let me take you back to the beginning for a few minutes. More than half of the 100 plus pilgrims who arrived on the Mayflower in November of 1620 were dead by the first Thanksgiving a year later. "The great sickness," as it was called, was probably a combination of scurvy from the ocean crossing, typhus, and pneumonia. Amongst the adult males, only 16 of the original 38 survived. For adult women, there were 11 survivors out of 27.<sup>vi</sup> Here's how Governor Bradford told it:<sup>vii</sup> "So they died sometimes 2 or 3 a day, and of 100 and odd persons, scarce 50 remained. And of these, in the time of most distress, there was but 6 or 7 sound persons who, to their great commendations be it spoke, spared no pains, night or day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them woods, made them fires, dressed their meat, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them -- in a word, did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure here to be named."

In the words of Jesus, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me."<sup>viii</sup>

Bradford also makes it clear that without the help of the local Wampanoag Indians, the pilgrims would never have made it to the first Thanksgiving. They generously shared food with the English settlers during the first winter and then showed them how to plant and cultivate corn the next spring and summer. Luckily the first harvest was a generous one, "safely gathered in ere the winter storms begin," as Governor Bradford put it. A three day feast was planned in late November, and the pilgrims invited the Indian chief Massasoit and his people. 90 Wampanoags arrived with 5 deer to eat, supplementing the wild turkeys the Englishmen had shot.<sup>ix</sup>

Can you imagine the mix of emotions, though, that must have been present at that first Thanksgiving. Everyone had reason to be in deep grieving, having been ravaged by disease and despair, and having lived in freezing, filthy hovels the first winter, watching half the people they knew and loved die in their arms.<sup>x</sup> Imagine the spiritual strength it must have taken, after all those hardships and horrors, to celebrate the positive amidst their destitution and desperation. Not only that, but they celebrated with the other human beings living nearby, people who the pilgrims' descendants, after taking more and more of their land and beginning a genocide, would often call "savages." Bradford wrote in his history of that first Thanksgiving: "Although it may not always be 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 others partake of our plenty."

Now how's that for a Thanksgiving vision: these devastated pilgrims saying that "by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish others partake of our plenty." We often wish others partake... The best way to give thanks is to give. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me."<sup>xi</sup>

An undergraduate in a class I taught several years ago explained how it's an annual tradition at his family's Thanksgiving table to talk about the way Americans on welfare are draining this country's strength. His family members want to see a complete end to welfare, and it can't be too soon. I don't think anyone has any doubt, I explained to the class, that a welfare system which condemned generation after generation to dependency on the government was in dire need of reform. Yet, what's happened, I asked that class, to the spirit of the great American holy day? Isn't this a time to give thanks, knowing the serious deprivations so many of us are spared in this country, and then to express our gratitude by remembering and reaching out to needy neighbors in a spirit of sharing? Yet, the students in that class seemed to think I was either hopelessly naive or very out of date. "Thanksgiving's just a time to relax and hang out with family and friends," they said. "It's really a very private time, not a time when anyone really thinks about others."

Our gospel reading today<sup>xii</sup> from Matthew today presents Jesus' last major discourse with his disciples before his death. Commentators have pointed out that this passage is intended as Jesus' last word, the climatic point to which the Gospel of Matthew has been carefully building.<sup>xiii</sup> It describes the coming of the Son of Man on the final day of judgment, and it's very clear about what will be important then. The passage says nothing about confession of faith in Jesus Christ, nothing about grace, or justification, or the forgiveness of sins. All that matters is whether or not one has lovingly cared for other people in need,<sup>xiv</sup> in particular for the least of those among us: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food."<sup>xv</sup> And the righteous then ask, "Lord, when was it that [we did this for you]?" And the king will answer them: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of the human family, you did it to me."<sup>xvi</sup>

As a Catholic commentary I use sums this up: "In the last analysis, it is love that determines whether people are good or bad. If their love is active, failure to reach perfect morality in other ways will be rare, and it will be forgiven. But there is no substitute for active love."<sup>xvii</sup> A Protestant commentary puts it this way: "Jesus has taught that self-giving care for others is the heart of the revealed will of God in the Torah... The messianic king has lived out his teaching that his kingdom consists of service to others."<sup>xviii</sup>

So, how best to give thanks in hard times? By service to others. Through active love. Through self-giving care to others. As Governor Bradford summed up the decimated pilgrims' feelings at the first Thanksgiving: "We often wish others partake of our plenty." Being surrounded by family and friends, by those we love, at Thanksgiving -- eating well, catching up, slowing down, relaxing -- should encourage us to active love in the days that follow the great American holy day, to service for others, to self-giving care. Instead of condemning Americans on welfare, we might roll up our sleeves and follow this inscription of what America stands for on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses,

yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"<sup>xix</sup>

So, let me get pragmatic here for a moment. In our gatherings next Thursday, let's start by actually counting our blessings and giving thanks, as those first Pilgrims did after their first year in America. Some of them were still alive, as are we. Thanks be to God. They had the fruits of the earth to eat, as will we. Thanks be to God. The weather was still good, ere the winter storms begin, and so it is now for us. Thanks be to God. They shared a sense of community, not only with family and friends, but also with strangers, as will many of us this Thursday. Thanks be to God. And how many more blessings will we be able to count and give thanks for, even if they aren't yet fully realized: freedoms of speech and association, advanced health care, free education for all through high school, free libraries and access to an astonishing wealth of information, democratic government, national prosperity unimaginable a century ago or in most of the world today, a strong national defense under civilian control, a national commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, freedom to worship, or not, exactly as we choose. And there's lots more that each of us can highlight in our own ways. Thanks be to God.

Then on Friday, and thereafter, let's give thanks by active giving, as Jesus called us to do. These are harder times than just two years ago. Let's work in food pantries, homeless shelters, clothing donation, and housing programs like Habitat for Humanity. Let's tutor children and immigrants. Let's volunteer time in hospitals and hospices and nursing homes and prisons. Let's find a way to put in pro bono time at work, participate fully in the political process as citizens, join voluntary organizations, and work for positive social change. That sounds like a lot, but at minimum, let's be sure we're actively doing at least one of those things, or an equivalent. What will it take to restore the great American holy day to its rightful place? It will take each of us starting in a small way. Even though you and I have personal reasons to feel deprived in a variety of ways in our own lives -- though each of us experience our own forms of pain and suffering -- the indomitable spirit of those first Pilgrims must provide some considerable inspiration. And the words of Jesus are clear and direct. Even amidst feelings we may have of despair and desperation, we can give thanks to God "Who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices, who, from our parents' arms, has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love."<sup>xx</sup> Let's pass that love on. And as you join now in singing the next hymn, look to the bottom left, and notice that its proclamation of thanksgiving was also forged in very hard times.<sup>xxi</sup> Now thank we all our God.

## NOTES

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- i. President George W. Bush, "Thanksgiving Day Proclamation," November 16, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/print/20011116-3.html>
  - ii. Ibid.
  - iii. President William J. Clinton, "Thanksgiving Day Proclamation," November 16, 2001, <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/ThanxProc2000.html>
  - iv. "We Sing Now Together;" words by Edwin T. Buehrer (1894-1969) and music by Adrian Valerius (1626), arranged by Edward Kremser, 1838-1914.
  - v. "America the Beautiful," words by Frederick Lucian Hosmer (1884) and music by William Walker (1835).
  - vi. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Story of the 'Old Colony' of New Plymouth (N.Y.: Knopf, 1956), pp. 62, 64.
  - vii. Modern English is substituted for Bradford's. The quotations come from "A Thanksgiving Sermon" by the Rev. Scott W. Alexander, published in the Church of the Larger Fellowship newsletter, November, 1993.
  - viii. Matthew 25:35-36.
  - ix. George Willson, The Pilgrim Reader (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), p. 152.
  - x. Alexander, "Thanksgiving Sermon."
  - xi. Matthew 25:35-36.
  - xii. Matthew 25:31-46
  - xiii. See, for example, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 107; New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 455.
  - xiv. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p. 455.
  - xv. Matthew 25: 34-35.
  - xvi. Matthew 25: 40.

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xvii. Jerome Biblical Commentary, p. 107.

xviii. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p. 455-456.

xix. From Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," in Songs of a Semite (1882).

xx. "Now Thank We All Our God," words by Martin Rinkart, 1647, and music by Johann Cruger, 1647, harmonized by Felix Mendelssohn, 1840.

xxi. "For much of his life, German Lutheran pastor and musician Martin Rinkart ministered to the walled city of Eisleben amidst the horrors of the Thirty Year's War. This hymn ["Now Thank We All Our God"] has become one of the most widely used hymns of the church."