

The First Fruits
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Here is a story: two old friends bumped into one another on the street one day. One of them looked forlorn, almost on the verge of tears. His friend asked, "What has happened to you, my old friend?"

The sad fellow said, "Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, my uncle died...."

His friend said, "I am so sorry."

Sad man: "...and he left me forty thousand dollars."

Friend: "That's a lot of money."

Sad man: "But, two weeks ago, a cousin I never even knew died...."

Friend, "Well, that's too bad."

Sad man: "...and he left me eighty-five thousand free and clear."

Friend: "Sounds like you've been blessed...."

Sad man: "You don't understand! "Last week my great-aunt passed away...."

Friend: "Well, I suppose she had lived a full life...."

Sad man: "I inherited a quarter of a million dollars."

Friend: "So, tell me why you look so unhappy?"

Sad man: "This week... nothing!"

Sadly, our sense of gratitude is often confused, tinged with false expectations, tainted by "what-ifs," distorted by comparisons with others. Or, we just plain forget to be thankful for the good things we "inherit" or receive as gifts. This week we will celebrate the national holiday of Thanksgiving, a chance for Americans of every faith and no faith to take time to remember. We are fortunate to have a religious tradition that gives us words for remembering, narratives of gratitude, and rituals of thanksgiving. We do not need to wait until late November to celebrate this. Each week we gather and find ways to praise the God from whom all blessings flow. Week in and week out, we continue the traditions of our ancestors, Christian and Hebrew – those people who understood that we need reminding, those people who taught us how to raise the song of harvest home.

Our ancestors understood that gratitude can be tricky. We can turn it into a tedious and rote process of making a mental list of things for which one is thankful. Or we can fall into the trap of feeling inadequate because we are not cheerful or spiritual enough in our gratefulness. Scripture offers us a corrective to this. Rather than a list, it is a way of life. Rather than being rooted in a narrow vision of need and acquisition, it grows out of God's faithfulness, God's generosity.

Today we began our worship with a responsive version of Psalm 100, the "Old Hundredth" of our Pilgrim forbears. The Psalm writer calls on "all the earth" to make "a joyful noise" and to "enter God's gates with thanksgiving." God is not being thanked here for military victory, or a good harvest, or any particular thing. Instead it is the very qualities of divinity - goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness – that call forth the joyful song. And these are qualities that human beings can share in and emulate.

The reading from Deuteronomy gives us a more in depth look at the nature and progression of true thanksgiving. It is sparked by the first spring harvest, the sign of the fruitfulness of the land. Then it moves to narrative, the story of how this was possible, how the people arrived in the land. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” – this is a sort of creed for the Hebrew people: the narrative of liberation and blessing. Note that it does not remain a third-person narrative. It starts by talking about the ancestral patriarch, Jacob, who went down to Egypt and became a mighty nation of many people. Then it goes on to speak in the first person: “the Egyptians treated **us** harshly...**we** cried to the Lord...the Lord heard **our** voice and saw **our** affliction...the Lord brought **us** out of Egypt... into this place and gave **us** this land.” In other words, the narrative is no longer a tale of distant ancestors and far away events. The speaker is brought into the story, personally, and so moved to gratitude. The speaker brings the first fruits, the symbol of the best the land has to offer, and blesses God for this abundance. It ends with sharing: the worshiper, the priest, and the foreigner in the land all celebrate together. All are aware of what had been and what might have been, and so they do not take any circumstance for granted. They reject greediness and possessiveness. Made aware through story and ritual, they are inspired by God’s generosity to be generous with other people. We adopt god-like virtues as a sign of our devotion.

The passage from the Gospel of John is a rather difficult exchange between Jesus and the crowds following him. Earlier in the chapter, he had fed 5000 people with a few loaves of bread and 2 fish. Avoiding their adulation and their desire to set him up as a political Messiah, Jesus goes off by himself and crosses the nearby lake. The crowd pursues him, apparently eager for another feast and another display of power. They remember a tradition that says that the Messiah will feed the people wilderness-bread, manna, as Moses had. Jesus challenges their pursuit of food, and re-directs them. Just as the Hebrews were to place themselves in a narrative and in a relationship, the crowds should place themselves into a new narrative and a new relationship, always remembering that God is the source of both earthly abundance and spiritual sustenance.

There is no Last Supper story in John’s Gospel. Instead, we get these enigmatic references to the bread of life. The earliest Christian would understand, as we do, that sharing bread is a powerful act. Indeed, one name for our celebration of the Last Supper narrative is “Eucharist,” the Greek word for Thanksgiving.

We are challenged by our readings today to rethink our thanksgiving. Are we grateful for things or grateful for relationship? Are we grateful for bread or for people? When we came into the sanctuary to the words of the 100th Psalm, it starts to lead us to a collective remembering and thanksgiving. It starts to place us in the ongoing narrative of gratitude. We realize that the first fruits, the harvest, the manna, the bread are all symbols, not for excess, but for the most basic gifts of life: food and drink and each other. The narrative allows us to look deeper than holiday abundance and overeating to see the spiritual dimension of all our yearnings and needs.

One of the songs that is traditionally sung by Jews on the Passover is the Dayenu. The name comes from the refrain, which means, “It would have been enough.” In it, the singers remember the many blessings of God during the time of the Exodus, and they marvel at each new evidence of God’s steadfast love. One version goes:

If God had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years,
and had not fed us the manna,
it would have been enough!

If God had fed us the manna,
and had not given us the Sabbath,
it would have been enough!

If God had given us the Sabbath,
and had not brought us before Mount Sinai,
it would have been enough!

If God had brought us before Mount Sinai,
and had not given us the Torah,
it would have been enough!

If God had given us the Torah,
and had not brought us into the land of Israel,
it would have been enough!

Dayenu.

I remembered this when I looked at the Norwich list serve a few days ago. One person was inspired to list the things in Norwich for which they were grateful. They were things like Marion Cross School's dedicated teachers, The Norwich Library and Lucinda Walker's vision, The Norwich Police Department and Doug Robinson's community service, Dan & Whit's and Dan Fraser's public spirit and a number of other things. Then, the next day, another person posted a list, with Earl Thompson, who for years has put up the American flags on Main St. and the Christmas Pageant. I began to think, Dayenu.

If we only had the Norwich Public Library
and not the Christmas Pageant,
it would have been enough.

If we only had the Christmas Pageant
and not Earl Thompson,
it would have been enough.

And so on, and so on. The striking thing about the lists on the list serve is that they were all people, and groups of people. And each one had a story, a narrative, which inspired the gratitude. Each one was a 'thank you' to the past and a 'yes' to the future. Each one "would have been enough," but the blessing is that we live in an interdependent world, with God-given energy flowing between us, allowing both giving and receiving. We no longer live in the agricultural society of the ancient Hebrews, so maybe the "first fruits" that we offer to God are in a different form. We can dedicate to God and offer to each other the first fruits of our communal bounty: kindness, creativity, compassion, prayer, song, welcome. And, if there happens to be some great food to share at the same time, so much the better.

I pray that each of you will have a blessed Thanksgiving, and find the steadfast love of God in community with others.