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Matthew 6:25-33

IN PRAISE OF THANKSGIVING

Welcome to our High Holy Day. You are sitting in the nave of the Good Ship Mayflower, named after the vessel which transported those intrepid pilgrims to the new world. You don't have to be a Congregationalist to know this, just someone who grew up in America and heard the story in school—of how half those pale-faced Europeans died in the first harsh winter. How the Indians (as we called them when I was in grade school) taught the Pilgrims to survive by dropping fish into the ground along with the corn seed.

Even now, in the gathering chill of November, grade school children have been cutting out pumpkins and making turkeys with the outline of their hands, and dressing up as either pilgrims in tall, funny hats or Indians in headdress and moccasins. Or to give it the flavor of Martin Luther King Jr.: little white boys and little white girls sitting down together with little red boys and little red girls as sisters and brothers in the New World (which of course was the Old World to those who already lived there) to answer in a most charming way the eternal question: “Can't we all just get along?”

Like almost every other sacred and sentimental holiday, we learned things growing up that turned out not to be true. In this sense, Thanksgiving shares much in common with Christianity—not because either one is without pathos and wisdom, but because we invest ourselves so deeply in the mythology that we miss the real lessons. I grew up with a highly sanitized, Eurocentric, and triumphal version of Thanksgiving--the kind you get when you put on a play at church and everyone is smiling and then you finish with pumpkin pie. But the truth is always more fearsome, less romantic, less entitled. But the truth, says Jesus is what sets us free.

If David Letterman were to do the top ten myths of Thanksgiving, number *one* might be that the first one was even held by the pilgrims. There is some competition, from of all places, Texas.

Some people in the town of San Elizario, near El Paso, claim the first Thanksgiving festival took place there in 1598, three years before the Pilgrims broke bread at Plymouth, after a Spanish explorer, Juan de Onate, celebrated a big Thanksgiving festival after leading hundreds of settlers on a grueling 350 mile trek across the Mexican desert. So, perhaps on Thursday we should be eating tortillas?

Then again, a group of Virginians at Berkeley Plantation on the James River claim the first Thanksgiving was held there on December 4, 1619, two years before the Pilgrims. They also do a reenactment every year, and claim that it was not the Mayflower we should be remembering, but the little ship named the *Margaret*, which brought 38 English settlers to that plantation before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

Myth number *two* is that the original Thanksgiving festival was about family. We think this because of Norman Rockwell paintings. In fact, it was a multicultural event, which we tend to forget. If it had been about family, they would never have invited the Indians.

Myth number *three* is that the feast itself, which apparently lasted three days, was about religion. Again, New England Separatists would hardly have considered a meal with what they considered to be heathen savages to be about religion. It was actually a harvest festival, and it had a lot to do with simply surviving—not to mention sharing the land with the original inhabitants. The Pilgrims did have observances that they called “Thanksgivings” – which were religious affairs, and everyone spent the day praying. But these occurred at different times of the year, not just in November.

Myth number *four* is that the Pilgrims ate turkey (or corn on the cob, apples, pears, potatoes, or even cranberries for that matter). Although they were used to eating wild turkeys, no one really knows for sure if they had turkey at the meal in question. What we do know is that they ate a lot of deer. Perhaps for next year’s Harvest Home Dinner we should invite you all to pick up your venison to cook and return to church. And remember, no forks in those days—so we ought to sit around and gnaw on drumsticks.

Myth number *five*, and this may be the most painful of all for us, is that the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. According the historian George Willison, who devoted his life to this subject, this is pure malarkey—a public relations stunt pulled off by townspeople to attract tourists. Its location is based entirely on the dubious testimony of Thomas Faunce, a ninety-five year old man who told the story more than a century after the *Mayflower* landed. His book came out after WW II, and nobody has ever bothered to check it out. And of course this much is certain. The Pilgrims didn’t land there first anyway. They first landed at Provincetown. And of course, one doesn’t “land” a ship *on* a rock anyway, unless you want to sink it. So the claim is that this is the spot where they stepped out, and the folks in Plymouth are sticking by their story.

Myth number *six* is that the Pilgrims lived in log cabins. But those did not appear in America until the late seventeenth century, introduced by the Germans and the Swedes. The Pilgrims actually lived in wood clapboard houses made from sawed lumber.

Myth number *seven* is that the Pilgrims all dressed in black (although I think it would have been a good look for them). Not only did they not dress in black, they didn't wear those funny buckles, weird shoes, or black steeple hats either. The idea of buckles came along in the nineteenth century as a popular image of quaintness—just as illustrators of that period gave Santa Claus a buckle. As for the blunderbuss, which is mistakenly thought to be a hunting rifle, it was mostly used for crowd control, but fits the quaint image of the Pilgrims nicely.

Myth number *eight* is that Pilgrims and Puritans are the same thing. U.S. Presidents get this wrong (along with being unable to pronounce the word “nuclear”). The Pilgrims came over on the Mayflower and lived in Plymouth. The Puritans, arrived a decade later, and settled in Boston. They came for religious reasons, or to put it more accurately, to be able to practice *their* brand of religion freely. It wasn't long before they were hanging Quakers in Harvard Square! Pilgrims were a more diverse lot and had a higher tolerance for diversity. Some were just strangers in search of riches in the new world. Others were saints in search of the New Jerusalem. But Puritans would have been horrified to be called Pilgrims, since they considered Pilgrims to be incurable utopian types who had given up on the Church of England. That's why, when I call you Pilgrims, I mean it as a compliment! We are hopeless utopian types who have given up on the Church of England.

Myth number *nine* is that Puritans hated sex. Actually, they welcomed it as a God-given responsibility (and they say theology has no practical benefits). Once, when a member of First Church in Boston refused to have conjugal relations with his wife for two years, he was expelled as a member. Cotton Mather, the celebrated Puritan minister, once condemned a married couple who had abstained from sex in order to achieve a higher spirituality. Apparently Mather did not believe that ones gets to God by going around your lover—or as Marianne Williamson is famous for saying, “People say ‘Oh God!’ at certain key moments during sex because that's as close to God as some people ever get.”

Myth number *ten*. Puritans hated having fun. This come from H.L. Mencken famous definition of Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy!” Actually, Puritans welcomed laughter and dressed in bright colors, at least if they were among the upper classes. The lower classes were not permitted to indulge themselves and wore dark clothing. But all the emphasis on being dull and paranoid about pleasure is a nineteenth century addition to the image of what were moderate and surprisingly wholesome human beings.

I tell you all this — not to rob you of Thanksgiving, but to give it back to you. There is a top ten list of myths about Jesus, but a mythological Jesus doesn't do much for me. The human Jesus, on the other hand, who like all humans must have had bad breath and snored when he slept, is much more compelling. I think the world has never needed the human Jesus more, and yet the most we get is the bobble head in a long white robe and a glowing halo of light. If he did come back, our first question would not be “What's the secret to peace in the Middle East?” but “Could you walk across my swimming pool?”

In fact what I love about Thanksgiving is that we have been mostly unable to ruin it by turning it into commercialized fairy tale. Oh, it's true, turkey growers do well, and those who make instant stuffing or cranberry sauce. But mostly, it's a kind of lazy day. It may be the closest thing that modern day Christians have to a Sabbath. Families gather, cook a big meal, and then doze their way through an afternoon of football or take walks beneath the yellow leaves in the pale November light. We feel the turning of the seasons, and the turning of our bodies, and it is poignant. Shall we fight it, to maintain the illusion of control. Or shall we just be grateful?

Gratitude (simple humble thankfulness) is the essential religious disposition. I mean, we didn't make the world. We didn't make ourselves. But here we are, in this beautiful, terrible, wonderful world. And the most amazing thing about our existence, or the existence of anything at all (or everything for that matter) is the fact that in fact we do in fact exist!

Just look at your hands. They are the calling card of your existence. They have worked, loved, played, and they help some people talk. Some play music, some lay bricks, some are gnarled with arthritis. But they are proof that you exist, and with those amazing opposable thumbs, they are proof that you are human. You can open your hands in kindness or you can clench them in rage. They can soothe or they can shatter, they can caress or they can strike. But they are a gift, just like your life—your one-of-a-kind-never-to-be-duplicated-life. I knew a woman once who said she learned to pray after giving birth to her first child. She counted all the fingers and all the toes and then said, “I needed Someone to thank.”

So here we are, in the House of Thanksgiving. Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open up the door and see all the people. All the people. We the people. Struggling to hold on to a nation of, by, and for the people—so help us God. Next to my family (and just a notch below my granddaughter Iris) this church is the greatest blessing in my life.

This generous, thoughtful church. This island of doing good instead of just talking about doing good. This place of patience in an impatient world. This place of joyous imperfection in a world where nothing is perfect. This place of song in a world where too many have stopped singing.

Be mindful. Look around. Don't miss a thing. These late autumn sunsets that are electric fuchsia. The north wind, closing up your windows and reminding you that you have windows. A mug of morning coffee, around which you have wrapped both of those amazing hands of yours. The open, trusting face of a dog, looking at you with her head cocked, asking only to be noticed, to be loved, to be fed. Asking only that you be what you were put on the earth to be: kind.

Back when the movie "Ghostbusters" came out the tag line was a question about what to do when you discover that a place is haunted. "Who you gonna call?" The church has existed in large measure for 2,000 years to say, "Who you gonna thank?" Rabbi Abraham Heschel said that all wisdom begins with what he called "radical amazement."

Sooner, rather than later, we will have to be done waging war, and start waging peace. Sooner, rather than later, we will need to remember that every stranger among us could be you and me, since we are all strangers to somebody. Sooner, rather than later, we're going to need to tell our Muslim sisters and brothers that if things get worse, we have a place where they can hide. Because we can't be thankful for our lives without making a commitment to the lives of others. Thankfulness is not a private affair. Our blessings *obligate* us to be a blessing to someone else.

Once we admit to how much more we have than we deserve, we must confront the reality of those who have less than they deserve. On Thanksgiving, we do not wink at God as if to say, "You and Me Big Guy." We bow our heads to say, "Why do I have so much Lord in a world that begs bread? Why was I born here, and not in Afghanistan?"

Look at your hands again, and think of that amazing poem about amazement by e. e. cummings: *how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any, lifted from the now of all nothing, human merely being doubt unimaginable You?*

A child might say, "the words are out of order Mr. Cummings." Yes indeed, he might reply, and so is your world—with its magnificent stadiums and its sorry, sorry schools. With its billionaires who amuse themselves to death while people starve to death. With its unending wars, draining blood and treasure and turning the future into a downward spiral. We call it "Thanks-giving" not Thanks-getting.

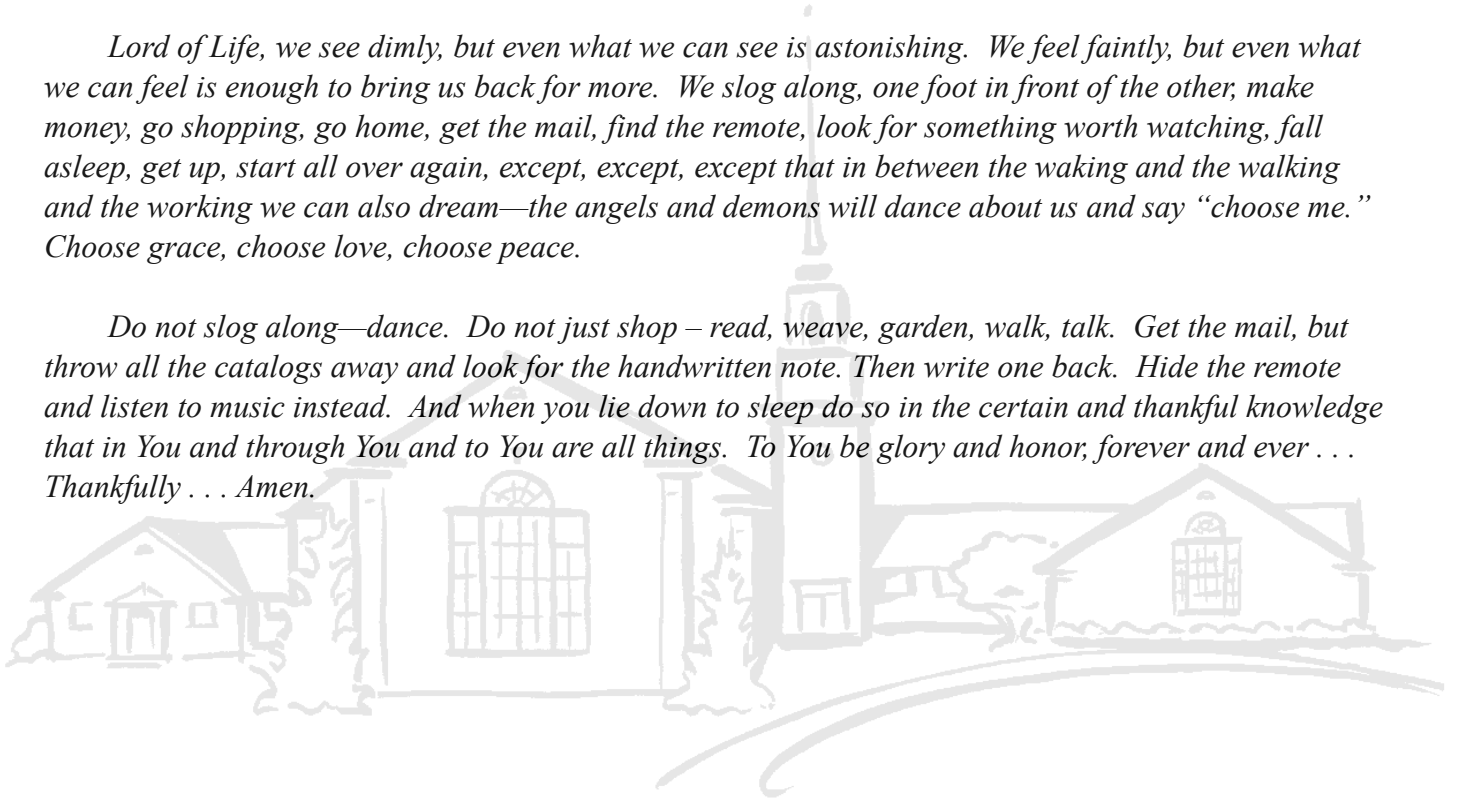
My hope for all of you is this. That on Thursday you will not be bored because nothing much is happening. Find your family. Put the leaf in the table. Say a prayer no matter how humble. Remember that jell-O salad can be a sacrament, and that all families are dysfunctional. Look for the stardust in the eyes of your loved ones. But most of all, remember that you do not have unlimited opportunities to say,

“I love you.”

Let us pray. . .

Lord of Life, we see dimly, but even what we can see is astonishing. We feel faintly, but even what we can feel is enough to bring us back for more. We slog along, one foot in front of the other, make money, go shopping, go home, get the mail, find the remote, look for something worth watching, fall asleep, get up, start all over again, except, except, except that in between the waking and the walking and the working we can also dream—the angels and demons will dance about us and say “choose me.” Choose grace, choose love, choose peace.

Do not slog along—dance. Do not just shop – read, weave, garden, walk, talk. Get the mail, but throw all the catalogs away and look for the handwritten note. Then write one back. Hide the remote and listen to music instead. And when you lie down to sleep do so in the certain and thankful knowledge that in You and through You and to You are all things. To You be glory and honor, forever and ever . . . Thankfully . . . Amen.



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