**Gratitude is Social** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Thanksgiving Eve The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Luke 17:11-19 Saint Paul, Minnesota
November 22, 2023

Does anyone here know who Mary Berry is? Mary Berry is a renowned British chef and food writer. She is best known as the host of *Mary Berry Cooks,* which is shown in this country on PBS.

I share this with you because tomorrow, PBS will be airing a show called, *A Mary Berry Thanksgiving,* which was obviously produced for the American market, because the only people who celebrate Thanksgiving in the U.K. are Americans and Canadians who celebrate their own distinct version of Thanksgiving on the second Monday of October every year.

Anyway, my future British son-in-law will be joining my extended family in Kansas City tomorrow to experience his first American Thanksgiving. And I’m interested to see his reactions to what’s on the menu. Sweet potato casserole, stuffing, pumpkin pie, and cranberry sauce are not staples of the British diet. Humor is likely to ensue.

I want you to think about this in terms of something that David Henson, a Greek Orthodox Christian, wrote a number of years ago—where he compares our American Thanksgiving traditions with *The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving* that we liturgical Christians use when we celebrate the Eucharist.

Here is what he said:

“I love feasts.

Not so much the eating part, but the preparing part. For the past three years, since becoming a stay-at-home dad, I have done most of the cooking, especially around the holidays, planning, preparing, and cooking festive feasts … By now, our family has its own traditional dishes, without which the table would seem bare: garlicky kale with dried cranberries, or Swiss chard with golden raisins and pine nuts; mashed potatoes, always a different way each year; green bean
casserole (nothing from a can); fresh orange-cranberry relish; mulled
apple cider; glazed Cornish hens instead of a full turkey; and a pumpkin-bourbon cheesecake to complete the meal.

And wine and bread. (Are you hungry yet?).

When I think about the meal, and shop for the ingredients, I get a rush
of nostalgic emotion and envision all the past year's perfect feasts,
forgetting of course the reality of it. It's difficult work.

(But when)  I see the eyes of my family and friends widen in excitement, in hunger, in expectation, in anticipation, I feel, deep within me, fed by something greater than food. When we pass the bread, pour the wine and toast, I see a feast, and echoes of a feast that has little to do with food. In these moments, Thanksgiving becomes something more like the Great Thanksgiving, or in Greek, the Eucharist.

I am sure there will be someone who complains about this holiday being one in which Americans overindulge in food and eat in excess, as they are wont to do. And I suppose there might be a valid criticism in that. There will be someone who calls us to remember that many, many people will be hungry on the day of feasts. There will be someone who reminds us that this day of  thanksgiving has a shadow of the slaughter of Native Americans. And they should, because we should remember these things, and hold that tension of sorrow with our elation of thanksgiving.

But Thanksgiving is also a day in which Americans remember to be thankful, and this is no small feat in a culture in which everything is not enough, in which the day after being so thankful we slam ourselves into malls and forget what it means to be thankful. The Great Thanksgiving is a moment in which Christians are reminded to be thankful, and that is no small feat.

Many progressive Christians fear being thankful for what they have because it has echoes of the *prosperity gospel* in which God's favored find wealth in spite of what the Gospels actually say.

But, I wonder what would happen if we let ourselves be genuinely thankful on Thanksgiving, thankful for the turkey that dried out, the Cornish hens that burned, the lumps in the mashed potatoes, the spilled wine on the floor, the heated argument, smoke alarm that erupts and wakes up a toddler, the passing of bread over strained relationships, the extra glass of wine, the stack of dishes to do in the sink, that we ate too much while others ate too little, thankful for all that we have
...

The reality of the feast is that being thankful in the midst of it can be difficult, because in the feast, in the coming together at the table, we are made human and messy … Before it, after it and in the idea of it, thankfulness is simple. In the midst of it, the setting of the table, the breaking of the bread, the sipping of wine, the Thanksgiving can be difficult. It is always the same, more, or less, and
always so different, more, or less, and always so mundane, and, if we pay
attention, so sublime.

And, if all else fails, pour another glass of. It is a feast, after all, and the wine should never be wasted.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Diana Butler Bass put it this way:

**“Think of how we depict Thanksgiving — people around a table eating a meal.** In the United States, it is the *romanticized image* of our most *primal gratitude myth:* Europeans and Indigenous people sharing around a table. Of course, it did not happen that way. But that is what myths are — stories that express something we desire, what we hope will be, and how we dream of happiness and peace.

Thanksgiving serves to remind us of what we can celebrate ***together:*** food, the bounty of the earth, the gifts of life and work, the pleasure of relationships, the real unity of community, peace and interdependence, and a call to serve others as we have been served.

We can start by celebrating the abundance of a beautiful and bountiful land, a land with enough for all, with its vast geographies layered with the histories, cultures, and hard work of the diverse peoples who have inhabited this place. It can be a day marking humility, forgiveness, and appreciation.

We can come together around the Thanksgiving table, making sure there are enough chairs for all to be seated and sated.

These things are worth celebrating.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Friends, I’ll leave you with this *Thanksgiving Prayer:*

**GOD**, there are many days we do not *feel* grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors. When the news is bleak and confusing. When there are threats, injustice, and war.

We struggle to *feel* grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we *choose* gratitude.

We choose to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.

We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We choose to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, for their stories and struggles; we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.

We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, accepting them for who they are. We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.

We choose to appreciate and care for our neighbors whatever our differences or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.

We choose to see the world as our shared commons, our home now and the legacy we will leave to the generations to come.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not *give* thanks. *We choose it.*

We will make this choice of thanks with courageous hearts, knowing that it is humbling to say, *“thank you.”* We choose to open ourselves to your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an unending circle of gratitude. We all are guests at your hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received.

We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we embrace grace, unconditional love, the giftedness of life everywhere. In this choosing, and in the making of this meal, we will pass gratitude onto the world.

Thus, with you, with all those gathered at this table, and with those at tables far distant, we pledge to make thanks. We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future. Around our family table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.

***We choose thanks.***

**Amen.[[3]](#footnote-3)**

1. David Henson, *The Great Thanksgiving,* The Christian Century, November 23, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, *Reimaging Thanksgiving,* adapted from *Grateful* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ####  A Thanksgiving Prayer by Diana Butler Bass, adapted from Grateful (2023 version)

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)