

Title: The Truth of Thanksgiving
Scripture: Psalm 100
Windsor Locks Congregational Church
November 28, 2021

Sermon Text: Psalm 100 (English Standard Version)

¹ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!

*² Serve the Lord with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!*

*³ Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

*⁵ For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Have you ever noticed how frequently the OT references past events? The books of the Pentateuch progressively reference Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Deuteronomy ends by reflecting on what the Lord did through Moses to free the Israelites. Joshua is reminded of this, as he is given responsibility to lead, and ends his book challenging the people to choose the false gods of their forefathers, or the LORD who led them out of Egypt. Each generation in Judges is measured by whether they know the LORD, and the work He's done for Israel. Recollection of Israel's history continues through the New Testament, with Matthew's extensive genealogy, and Steven's lengthy defense, all appealing to common history, a common destiny, and a common purpose: to know and please God.

A few days ago our nation commemorated Thanksgiving. Investigating this holiday, I was surprised by how we have digressed from our historical origins. Today I hope to refresh our collective memory of three founding values, represented in a simple acronym. They are:

E (for Everyone), A (for The Almighty), and T (for Thanksgiving).

To understand these, as illustrated in Psalm 100, we must first orient ourselves in history.

The early 1400s was “the age of discovery.” Spanish and Portuguese explorer-soldiers sought gold, fortune and fame, pushing the known limits of navigable trade routes. In 1492, Christopher Columbus established a route to “the new world.” 29 years later (1521) Ferdinand Magellan was first to circumnavigate the world. Between these events (in 1517), Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg church, and the Protestant Reformation was in full swing.

In 1607, 115 years after Columbus, Jamestown, VA was settled. And in 1620 (128 years after Columbus and 13 years after the founding of Jamestown) the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, as a confluence of geographic and theological discovery. For those Pilgrims, the dangers and opportunities ahead were a better option than the religious persecution they left behind. It would be another ten years before the Puritans (distinct from the Pilgrims) settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹

What we consider “The First Thanksgiving” was held November 1621. There were subsequent occasions of thanksgiving; but, for nearly 220 years this event was barely mentioned. Throughout the U.S. (mostly in New England), Fall celebrations of thanksgiving became increasingly popular without acknowledging the 1621 event.

In the 1700s the colonies survived the War for independence. In 1789, Congress directed the new President to proclaim a National Day of Thanksgiving.² In 1827 Sarah Hale began publishing articles, in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and writing leaders, petitioning for a national Thanksgiving holiday. She relentlessly pursued this campaign for 36 years. In 1841, a Unitarian minister (Rev. Alexander Young) published an article presenting the Pilgrims and their “First Thanksgiving of New England.” Though filled with conjecture and inaccuracies, the imagery captivated the new nation desperate for a sense of identity.³ In 1863, in a country steeped in Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving to be held annually, on the last Thursday of November.

Recalling history forces reconciliation between the past and the present, helping us celebrate this holiday more effectively. For example, Christopher Columbus (sailing the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria), and the subsequent Jamestown settlers, were essentially gold-seeking, slave-trading exploiters. What drove their accomplishments became their undoing. Later, just as Martin Luther sought a pure faith distinct from the corrupt church,⁴ the early Pilgrims sought liberation from the corruptions of their state-run church. Determined to avoid the failures of the Jamestown colony (with known fractious conflicts, hostility toward the indigenous peoples, and class hierarchy - where minority members worked to support the gluttonous consumption of the whole band),⁵ the small band of Pilgrims (brought by the Mayflower) collectively embraced submission to Scripture, sought peace with the Indians, and shared the workload as a community

¹ Dave Roos, “What’s the Difference Between Puritans and Pilgrims?” History.com, last modified March 16, 2021, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/pilgrims-puritans-differences>.

² History.com Editors, “Thanksgiving 2021,” History.com, last modified November 11, 2021, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/history-of-thanksgiving>.

³ Robert Tracy McKenzie, *The First Thanksgiving: What the Real Story Tells Us About Loving God and Learning from History* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 148.

⁴ Peter J. Marshall and David B. Manuel Jr., *The Light and the Glory (God’s Plan for America Book #1): 1492-1793* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2009), 72, Kindle.

⁵ Marshall & Manuel, 107-116.

of equals. Their harsh struggles yielded a mortality rate barely half the devastating 80-90% experienced in Jamestown. For the Pilgrims, the “sacred covenant” that separated them from the old world, bound them to each other in the new world.⁶

These 102 Pilgrims crammed into the Mayflower, in a space about the size of a volleyball court, for sixty-six horrific days at sea. False starts had delayed their departure, using up vital provisions before leaving England. Giant waves, darkness, smell, little to do and harassment from the sailors marked their journey, yet they doggedly prayed together. On November 9th came the welcomed cry, “Land ho!” But, before leaving the ship, to ensure their success, they drafted a covenant reinforcing their foundational principles of equality and a representational government operating by the consent of the governed. This powerful concept was so galvanizing it later evolved into a document British soldiers sought to destroy, that was hid in an oak tree near this church, later represented in the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”⁷ But if we confuse which boat they were on, or their mission, we miss all of that.

One glaring paradox is that those Pilgrims, who’s caricatures we elevate in giant floats at our annual Macy’s Parade, made their mark on history through the deep conviction that extra-biblical holy days, imposed by civic authority (created by man, not God), encourage mindless worship based on a date, not the heart, promoting a false spirituality. This was one of the main reasons they left England. Those early Pilgrims would not endorse a Government Holiday of thanksgiving.⁸

Looking at history, we must also realize that the dinner held by the Pilgrims in 1621 was not the “First Thanksgiving” in the Americas. Before those Pilgrims, the indigenous peoples gave gratitude to their deity for generations. By 1564 French Huguenots (also fleeing religious persecution) celebrated thanksgiving at their new home, near present-day Jacksonville, FL. In 1565 Spanish Catholic conquistadors celebrated thanksgiving in St. Augustine, FL. In 1598 Spanish colonists celebrated thanksgiving near El Paso, Tx. Earlier English colonists celebrated in Maine (1607) and two in Virginia (1610 and 1619). In fact, even the Plymouth Pilgrims expressed thanksgiving before 1621 through fasting.⁹ What distinguished the Pilgrims were values more profound than being “first.”

While simplifying memories to grasp history is understandable, what we observe from Scriptures is a practice of constantly reviewing and re-telling history so we don’t forget it, and so we understand it correctly. So, while we understand that those early Pilgrims probably didn’t have cranberry sauce, stuffing, or green bean casserole with dried onions on the top, they did have eel, and venison delivered by 90 Wampanoag Native People, who also introduced maple syrup, and even “popcorn” at that feast. In short, the truth is more interesting than fabrication! What happened in 1621, on the shores of Massachusetts is worthy of remembrance. Let’s get it right.

⁶ McKenzie, 51-52.

⁷ Marshall & Manuel, 137-154.

⁸ McKenzie, 51.

⁹ McKenzie, .

Now let us shift focus from the details of “who” and “when” to discuss the “what.” What do we mean when we reference “thanksgiving?” The only record of the 1621 Pilgrim event was a letter sent by Edward Winslow (the Plymouth governor’s assistant), as an appeal to their investors back in England stating,

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five Deer, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always 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 you partakers of our plenty.”¹⁰

The intent of our modern holiday is also found in a proclamation from our first President, George Washington, on October 3, 1789, which begins with the words,

“Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor...and also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions...”¹¹

Then we read President Lincoln’s words as he proclaimed an annual National Day of Thanksgiving, on October 3, 1863, saying,

“...I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States...to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a Day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. ...”¹²

If investigating our national history for Thanksgiving is surprising, the biblical foundation is even more so.

My seminary professor of the Psalms, Hebrew scholar Bryan Widbin, explained that our Western concept of gratitude is perceived as selfish and offensive in other cultures. We think if we list what we’re thankful for, the longer the list the more the gratitude, with “thank you” considered good manners. Yet other cultures consider this a display of individuality and selfishness. Hebrew scholar, theologian and author Claus Westermann confirms that there is no Ancient

¹⁰ McKenzie, 35.

¹¹ George Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation, 3 October 1789*, Founders Online, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, Transcript for President Abraham Lincoln’s Thanksgiving Proclamation from October 3, 1863, accessed November 12, 2021, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/transcript_for_abraham_lincoln_thanksgiving_proclamation_1863.pdf.

Hebrew word “*to thank*,” and that words translated “thanks” in our Bibles should be translated as “praise,” “bless” or “confess.”

Westermann provides the following distinctions:

- The word translated in English as “thanks” (Hebrew: *hōdāh*) is only used from people to God, as a form of praise.
- In praise the one being praised is elevated, unlike the recipient of thanks.
- In praise we focus on the one we praise, in thanks we are mindful of ourselves and what we received.
- Praise is free and spontaneous, where thanks is often a duty.
- Praise tends to have a forum and occur in a group, where thanks tend to be private.
- Praise cannot be commanded and is joyful, thanks is often commanded.
- Thanks states, “I thank you,” whereas praise begins with “you are...”
- Thanks depends on receiving, praise simply acknowledges the one praised.
- Thanks gives expression for individuality (our cultural aspiration), whereas the ancients (and Pilgrims!) valued the community.
- “To thank” is a subordinate element of praise.
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Westermann sums up his observations saying, “it comes to this, in the vocabulary of thanks Man remains the subject, while in the sentences of praise God is the subject...”¹³ I confess, my Western sensitivities struggle with this. So, let’s take a contemporary approach and check out what “the authority” says...let’s check Google.

Gabriel Clark is a British English teacher with a website that helps people from other cultures understand how to use English properly. He explains progressive ways to express gratitude saying, “cheers,” “ta mate,” “thanks a bunch,” and “thanks so much, really.” Then he says, “when you feel particularly happy because of *what someone has done for you*, you can add an “extension” with one of these phrases... [such as] “you’re awesome!” [and] “you’re the best!”¹⁴ Did you see that? First, he says to express gratitude for what someone does *for us* (it’s based on ourselves); yet, a higher expression of gratitude focuses on the character of the one being thanked (“you’re awesome”).

Matthew MacLachlan, another blogger helping people in cross cultural situations, states that in the West “...people thank others for performing any tasks which benefit *them*.”¹⁵ Just to reiterate, these people are not just teaching vocabulary, they are explaining how and when to use the language. This reveals our *culture*.

ABA English provides a “Digital English Academy,” in which they explain the origins of “Thank you,” which is derived from the term “to think.” It used to mean “I will remember what

¹³ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 27-29.

¹⁴ Gabriel Clark, “27 different ways to say THANK YOU (and how to reply),” Clark and Miller Better English Better Communication Skills, Last updated May 31, 2018, Accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.clarkandmiller.com/27-different-ways-to-say-thank-you-and-how-to-reply/>.

¹⁵ Matthew MacLachlan, “Cross Cultural Politeness – Beyond Please and Thank you,” Last Updated May 23, 2010, Accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.communicaid.com/cross-cultural-training/blog/cross-cultural-politeness-beyond-please-and-thank-you/>.

you did for me,” once again depicting the usage (albeit considered polite) as essentially self-centered.¹⁶

Jonathan Tudge, professor at the University of North Carolina, is considered an expert in cultural differences in gratitude. Reporting on his research, an online magazine at the University of California explains that “Americans (and Italians, too) are inveterate thankers, expressing gratitude in many everyday situations when people from other cultures simply do not.” The article states that “*Americans tend to be very individualistic in contrast with collectivist cultures that put much more emphasis on the social group ... [adding] ...85 percent of the world’s population lives in cultures that researchers deem as more collectivist.*” To us, as Christians, who believe we wrestle with invisible external forces,¹⁷ who fight daily against our internal pride,¹⁸ and whose unity should be evidence of God’s presence,¹⁹ this cultural pattern of self-centeredness should be of great concern. This article then takes a shocking turn saying, “True gratitude, after all, is ... a genuine wish to *pay back* the undeserved blessings you receive.” Is that what our gratitude is? Not only are we individualistic, do we subconsciously use gratitude as currency to earn God’s favor? This cross-cultural examination reveals that while some people had a greater sense of well-being after expressing gratitude, others were incumbered with a greater sense of guilt, sadness and indebtedness. Summarizing the research, this scientific, non-sectarian article ends with two quotes which should stand out for us (as Christians):

“What’s clear is that gratitude deeply intersects with a culture’s attitude about the self and its relation to others.”

“At a time when the society seems to be more about *me me me*, we really need to get people thinking about connections.”²⁰ Christians, how we express gratitude subtly expresses and impacts relationship!

Having oriented ourselves with the history of the early Pilgrims, and the evolution of our Nation’s Thanksgiving celebration, we saw how the Pilgrim’s success was contingent upon their covenant with each other, and their covenant with God (reminiscent of the Greatest command!). Our founding fathers used language of repentance, solidarity, and humility before God that might provoke calls for impeachment in today’s society. A modern, cross-cultural assessment of saying, “thank you” revealed our valued self-sufficiency. Now we look to those three core values of the early Pilgrims, depicted in a simple acronym characteristic of our annual celebration:

¹⁶ ABA English, “The Origin of ‘Thank You’,” ABAEnglish.com, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://blog.abaenglish.com/the-origin-of-please/>

¹⁷ Ephesians 6:11-12, “*Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (NIV).

¹⁸ Psalm 19:12-13, “*But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression*” (NIV).

¹⁹ John 17:23, “*I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought into complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*” (NIV).

²⁰ Kira M. Newman, The Greater Good, “How Cultural Differences Shape Your Gratitude,” Last updated July 15, 2019, Accessed November 11, 2021, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_cultural_differences_shape_your_gratitude.

First “E” stands for “Everyone.” As much as our physical senses send signals to our brain based on our own experience, prompting instinctive responses, life is not about us. My comfort, my pleasures, my wants and needs must not dictate my priorities. We must be conscious of the greater community, and to an even greater transcendent cause. We each must tell ourselves, “It’s not about me!”

Second, “A” stands for “The Almighty.” It is the Lord God who is sovereign over all. Knowing and pleasing Him should be the center of our collective efforts.

And, finally, “T” stands for “Thanksgiving.” Together we acknowledge the character and sovereignty of God. Our gratitude should not be contingent upon our pleasure. Instead, we acknowledge the goodness and greatness of God in all situations, striving to sense His transcendent purposes and good character in every circumstance. I’m reminded of a little Dutch woman (named Cory) at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, during WWII. Her sister implored her to be thankful for everything, but with teeth-clenching bitterness Cory insisted, “I will not be thankful for the fleas.” Sleeping with these tiny pests was the epitome of injustice, indignity, and humiliation to her clean-Dutch sensitivities. Then they realized that the reason the guards never came into their barracks, the reason their contraband Bible was never discovered, the reason they could hold daily Bible lessons unmolested (allowing soul-feeding fellowship and helping others know God’s love), was because the guards were avoiding the fleas, prompting her sister to say, “*Cory, we can be thankful even for the fleas!*”²¹

Because our modern English expression of “thanks” can be perceived as selfish, we must strive together to intentionally celebrate the giver and not the gift. In teaching this, Professor Widbin relayed a beautiful and poignant example from his own life, when playing catch with his young son.

After they finished, his son could have said, “Thank you,” satisfying our cultural standard for manners, reflecting the son’s pleasure in the father’s gift. Instead, the little boy looked his dad in the eye and with a big smile proclaimed, “You’re the best dad in the world!” focusing instead on the character of the father.

Now we look to Psalm 100, which reveals these core values from Scripture.

“¹ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!”

The Psalmist not only provokes a thunderous, uninhibited vocalization of praise, but **all** peoples are called to join in this universal proclamation, acknowledging the Lord of the earth. In their commentary, Tucker and Grant describe how radical it is that our praise be missional, as the covenant community invites the global community to join in praise.²² This also forecasts that day when “...*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue acknowledge that*

²¹ Corrie Ten Boom, from the movie version of her book, *The Hiding Place*.

²² W. Dennis Tucker Jr. & Jamie A. Grant, *The NIV Application Commentary, Psalms Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 450-451.

*Jesus Christ is Lord*²³.” As we continue reading, remember: this global community is included throughout Psalm 100. In our outline, this is the “E” for “Everyone.”

*² Serve the Lord with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!*

*³ Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

And here we see the “A” for “The Almighty.” “*The Lord, he is God.*” This is our focus. This is our purpose, confronting a profound truth. We are “...*the sheep of his pasture.*” We love the placid imagery of Psalm 23 “*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters...*” But have you considered what are sheep for? The Shepherd does not exist for the comfort of the sheep; rather, the sheep exist for the pleasure and purposes of The Shepherd. Everyone, The Almighty...

*⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

*⁵ For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

The global community’s focus is not on what they receive; rather, their praise is focused on how His gifts reveal the character of the giver. Who is this God? He is good, loving and faithful. This is their focus and is the “T” in our acronym of “Thanksgiving.”

“E,” it’s not about me. Each of us are part of the larger community. “Everyone.” “A,” the center of our collective focus is “The Almighty.” He is our transcendent cause. And “T,” we acknowledge His character through the evidence of His gifts, as a global community, this is our act of Thanksgiving. Not the self. Not the gift; rather, the giver.

As the musicians come to lead us in our final worship, I encourage everyone to pray and worship God together, exercising this lesson of Thanksgiving. Consider what you are grateful for. Make your list, but don’t stop there. These things are but symptoms. Consider the cause. What do the gifts reveal about the character of the giver? I will start, then I encourage you to shout out your own acknowledgement of praise to the Lord. The musicians will close our corporate prayer, leading a song of worship. Join me as we close our eyes and bow our heads together in prayer.

²³ Philippians 2:10-11 (NIV).