

Face to Face

A Sermon for Worship on Thanksgiving Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 21, 2021
Texts: 1 Corinthians 13

Welcome to our Sunday morning worship on this Thanksgiving Sunday! I have always loved Thanksgiving, so I do enjoy this particular Sunday worship service. But not everyone feels the same, I know. I actually got into a heated discussion online yesterday among a group of pastors arguing about whether or not one should even acknowledge Thanksgiving in a worship service, never mind making it the focal point of worship. Folks from the more highly liturgical traditions, like Episcopalians and Lutherans and even some Presbyterians were arguing that Christ the King Sunday should be the only focus in worship today. This Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday is traditionally the liturgical theme of the Sunday before Advent begins. Not a concept I resonate with so it will come as no surprise that I was a pro-Thanksgiving voice in that conversation. Ministers find the most inane things to argue about at times. That whole “how many angels can dance on the head of a pin” thing can be far too real for some of my colleagues.

I like Thanksgiving for a lot of reasons and I always have. I remember the dining room table in the house where I grew up with all the leaves in to fit everyone around the table. I remember the “good” china and glassware sparkling on top of the antique lace tablecloth. I remember so much food it barely fit on the table now big enough to seat 12. I remember my mom baking pies and my grandmother making bread cubes for stuffing. I remember

pimento cheese filled celery sticks as the closest thing to appetizers we ever had. I remember my dad always rummaging in the fridge around 9pm because he wanted to have the first sandwich made from the leftover turkey. So many memories, most of them happy. I am sure all of you have your own treasured Thanksgiving memories too. Hold on to them. Talk about them in your family because as the years fly by those memories only become more precious. That too is part of Thanksgiving.

One of the reasons some of my colleagues were so adamant about not preaching about nor even acknowledging Thanksgiving is that they see it as a secular holiday rather than a religious one. I can see why that is their thinking, given that Thanksgiving has become for far too many the kick-off of the Christmas shopping season. I see more and more Christmas trees popping up in my neighborhood before Thanksgiving these days and I think this whole “shop til you drop” mentality that kicks in this time of year is just plain sad. It’s about as disconnected from pausing to consider and give thanks for the blessings of our lives as it can be. Although, one possible side-effect of this last Covid year is that the Black Friday sales are no longer confined to the day after Thanksgiving. I’m not sure why that is exactly, but it’s a good thing that so many big box stores have backed off the Thanksgiving night shopping extravaganzas.

Another of the reasons my colleagues do not like Thanksgiving is one that troubles me deeply as well, if I am being honest. That is the somber realization that our ancestors whose holiday this is – the Pilgrims and Puritans of New England – were

responsible for beginning one of the worst genocides ever to take place in the world. We don't think about this side of the Thanksgiving story, at least not our romanticized view of that first celebration. You know that story – the Native Americans and Colonists coming together for a bountiful feast to celebrate the survival of the new colony in Plymouth. It's re-enacted at Plymouth Plantation every year and you can even attend, if you are so inclined and have a ton of money laying around to invest in what truly is a unique living history museum experience. The whole problem with this story, though, is that it completely overlooks that within a few short years of the arrival of the white man on these shores, the Native American populations were decimated by disease, some intentionally spread to them through blankets contaminated with small pox, and others killed in military skirmishes with the Colonists who by now saw the Native Americans as nothing but an impediment to their personal agenda. An entire way of life of these native peoples was slowly and systematically destroyed in the years following that mythical first Thanksgiving, and for that, we all should be grieving and pleading with God for forgiveness.

Our connections with these First Peoples of this area are still visible today, all around us actually. In Rhode Island, the five major tribes were the Pequots, the Nipmucs, the Niantics, the Narragansetts and the Wampanoags. In Connecticut, were found the Narragansetts, the Nipmucs, the Pequots and Wampanoags as well, but also the Mohegans, the Pocumtuck and the Abenaki. Those names sound familiar? Of course they do! The names of these first peoples are everywhere around us with our own church

located off Pequot Trail! I mention these tribes of the First Peoples this morning because we need to remember that we are truly building our lives on land that was theirs long before the first sailing ship from England crested the horizon bringing with it the seeds of destruction on a scale no one fully comprehends to this day. So, I get it that some people get really upset by that piece of the Thanksgiving story. I do too. But, Thanksgiving – the good, the bad, the ugly – is still part of our story in the United States. What better place to acknowledge its troubled and troubling history than here in God’s church.

Face to face. We need to find the courage and the strength to look at, acknowledge, and even weep for the sad and sinful pieces of our Thanksgiving heritage we celebrate in the week ahead. This phrase, “face to face,” comes right out of the beautiful Scripture text I chose for our reflection this morning. We all know this beautiful passage, so commonly read at weddings and even funerals, as the ideal description of what love between humans should be. It is truly a beautiful text. “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoings but rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” In these words are captured the longing we all have to love and be loved. But as we read on, we see that these same words also call us to accountability. “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.” Dear ones, this text calls us not only

to the promise of love between people who already care for each other. It calls us just as strongly to see the truth of the ugliness life can hold, of the evil things people do, sometimes even in the name of God. It calls us to set aside the dimness of our memories to come face to face with the problems of life. Sometimes those problems are societal – like the decimation of the First Peoples or even the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse on all charges, clearing the way for gun toting teenagers to go after protestors they disagree with.

Dear ones, before we can come to God with our gratitude for all the blessings of our lives this Thanksgiving, we must – we must – come face to face with who we really are, as individuals and as a society. We must do this because we cannot move beyond all the problems of this world until we acknowledge they are real and dangerous to everyone’s health and well-being. We must find the courage to come face to face with our sins and shortcomings because only then can we come face to face with just how much God loves us, just how much hope God has for us, just how much God can make clear the way before us, if only we will be open to God’s loving guidance. Face to face, seeing it all and determining what is we can do to make a difference, tiny and insignificant though it may seem. Nothing that strives to bring more love into the world is ever insignificant to God.

In closing this morning, I would like to share with you some wisdom from one of my favorite contemporary Christian writers, Diana Butler Bass. In her weekly blog post this past week, Diana writes about what she calls “The Turkey Hostage Situation.” What

she means is the tradition around so many of our Thanksgiving tables to not let anyone eat until they have shared one thing they are thankful for. She observes, rightly, that asking folks to be thankful *for* something brings the focus on to counting blessings of material things or life successes. As such, she argues, we are commodifying thankfulness. I think she's on to something here. I myself have been part of several turkey hostage situations over the years and it does feel more than a little odd. Not the being thankful part so much as it is figuring out what is the right thing to say in that situation. So, as an alternative to turkey hostage thankfulness requests Diana offers several different prompts to get the conversation about gratitude to go a little deeper around those Thanksgiving tables. Here are her suggestions for different questions to pose to your dinner guests:

- *To* whom or what are you grateful?
- What challenges have you been grateful *through*?
- How have you been grateful *with* others?
- Where have you discovered gratitude *within*?
- How has your life been changed *by* being grateful?
- *In* what circumstances have you experienced thankfulness?

What a difference a preposition makes, right? All our English teachers were right!

Dear ones, Thanksgiving awaits. Do remember to be thankful but dare to expand that thankfulness beyond short lists soon forgotten. Dare to come face to face with all the challenges and struggles of this past year and find thankfulness to God because of them, rather than in spite of them. Dare to embrace yourself and your loved ones just as they are, even when they annoy you or

make you crazy. Dare to see them, to see all of your life and history, face to face, knowing that each moment has been and continues to be a gift of our God who loves you beyond all reason. Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.