

Generosity—A Way We Say Thanks (Thanksgiving Sunday on Creation 5)
Reflection for 11 October 2020 on Deuteronomy 8:7-18 and Corinthians 9:6-15
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What does it mean for us to live as a people of thanksgiving? Our readings today show us that “thanks—giving” really is about remembering. To give thanks, we have a memory of something about which we feel grateful. When we thank someone for doing something, we are remembering what they did.

To live as a people of thanksgiving, means to remember our relationship with God and to live that out in our daily lives. That means that thanksgiving is to be a **way of life** for us as people of God. It is not just one day of the year, but a way of life.

By remembering God’s gifts and living gratefully in relationship with God, we are freed from thinking we have to hold on to everything we have for fear of future scarcity. Instead, our remembering opens our hearts to the reality of abundance, which leads us to consider extravagant generosity—out of thanksgiving to God.

A friend and former colleague—who just happens to be a former congregant of my hubby Stephen—tells a story of an amazing sight her young son noticed one morning. Deb’s son Robby called her to the front window to see the sunrise. The sun actually rises at the back of their house, so she was a little confused by the request.

She hadn’t even had her first cup of coffee, but dragged herself over to share the view. She writes, “My droopy eyes popped—the sun was just cresting the horizon (in the opposite direction) and its life-giving light was just kissing the tops of the brightly coloured trees in front of us. It made them look as if they were illuminated, glowing even. Rob turned to me and said, ‘It’s cool, Mom, we’re watching the sunrise without seeing the sun.’ And I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Gratitude for the sunshine, for the fall colours and for my son—who every day teaches me to look at the world in a new way.”

A national holiday to be thankful, to concentrate on our blessings, is in and of itself a gift.ⁱ According to what I could find on the internet there are very few countries that have a national holiday for Thanksgiving, though forms of giving thanks are celebrated culturally and in religions all over the world.

Gratitude is a gift. There is a joy in acknowledging our blessings. To be able to do so together as a nation, though, is a special experience.

It's not always celebrated at the same time of year as we here in North America do, and people in other countries have their own names for it. Some of the celebrations include dancing, some include **offerings**—note that!—some include feasting, and all include giving thanks to God.

The first Thanksgiving feast in what is now the U.S. was held in celebration and thanks to God by the pilgrims, for their survival of the bitter winter of 1621. It was also a way of thanking the First Nations people for teaching them how to grow corn and some other crops that made their survival possible. So, the way those pilgrims expressed their thanks to their benefactors was by **being generous**—giving back by sharing food in a celebration that went on for three days, by some accounts!

For those wondering what other countries celebrate a thanksgiving, there are some observances in other countries that are not celebrated as national holidays. For instance, Stanthorpe, Australia celebrates an Apple and Grape Festival in March, at the time of their harvest, which happens at a different time of year in the southern hemisphere. Sounds kind of like some of the local fairs here, such as the St. George Apple Festival.

India's state of Goa has a thanksgiving celebration, only there it's called Ladainha or Ladin. Ladin means a litany to the Virgin Mary. During this time the people thank God for all the good things, both physical and spiritual, that they have received in life.

For the tribes of West Africa there is a Festival of Yams. Yams are the most common food in Nigeria and Ghana, and the first crop to be harvested. The people have days of offerings and ceremonies where they offer the yams to their ancestors and gods and then distribute them to the villagers. Giving thanks by being generous! This festival is held at the end of the rainy season around the beginning of August.

There is also the Homowo Festival for the Ga people of Ghana, West Africa. The word Homowo means "hooting at hunger" and derives its origin from the migration of the Ga people to Ghana. The people traveled for many years and suffered from famine. But they worked together and helped each other and eventually reached the west coast where they live today. After

they planted their crops and had a fruitful harvest, they held a feast where they thumbed their noses or "hooted" at the difficult times and the hunger that they had suffered through and so Homowo began.

In some of the cultures of Africa they also have a ceremony called "First Fruits." In this ceremony, the newly harvested crops are blessed and the people are purified before they partake in the feast. Sounds like something straight out of Deuteronomy, where the Israelites are told to give their first fruits to God. This concept is the basis for making our decisions about how much we will give for our offerings by giving back to God off the top of our monthly income, not just from left-overs after we spend our income for the month.

The Harvest Festival is one of the oldest known festivals. The Israelites had one. In Korea, the harvest festival is combined with something similar to All Saints Day, when food is shared with the ancestors, who are thanked for the fact that we are here at all.

In the UK, the harvest festival goes back to a time before Christianity. When the Saxon farmers cut their corn, the first sheaf was offered to one of the fertility gods so the god would grant them a fruitful harvest in the coming year. It was believed that the last sheaf of corn to be cut contained the Spirit of the Corn. There was usually a ritual animal sacrifice performed with this cutting. The animal was usually a hare that was found hiding in the corn field. In later years, a hare made of straw was used instead of the real thing and this led to the people making plaited "corn dolls" to represent the goddess of the grain. Perhaps you have some corn dolls in your decorations at home. When all the harvest had been brought in, the entire community was invited to come together in a celebratory feast.

Even after Christianity came to Britain, the people continued their traditions with very little change. They held rituals and ceremonies both at the beginning and at the end of the harvest. They continued to make corn dolls, carrying them in festive processions, placing them in a place of honour at the feast and keeping them until the next Spring. A lot of the harvest traditions are still around and have been combined as liturgical festivals. A more modern tradition is for kids to take fruits and vegetables to the church to offer during the service. Afterwards, the food is given out to people in the community. Another example of thanksgiving being expressed in generosity.

I wonder whether our tradition of lavishly decorating the church at Thanksgiving came from such a practice?

The Harvest Festival in the UK is held on or near the Sunday of the Harvest Moon, but it is not a national holiday for Thanksgiving like we have here in Canada, or in the USA.

Most of us proud Canadians know the story of Martin Frobisher trying to find a northern passage to the Orient. Though he never made it, he did found a settlement in what we now call Newfoundland. In 1578, 43 years **before** the American pilgrims feasted with their First Nations neighbours, Martin Frobisher held a ceremony so that everyone could formally give thanks for surviving the long sea voyage.

Over twenty years later, French settlers arrived in Canada after crossing the ocean with the explorer Samuel de Champlain. They also held Thanksgiving feasts and shared their celebration with the neighbouring First Peoples, as early as 1604—19 years before the American pilgrim thanksgiving.ⁱⁱ

In Canada we are blessed with so much—freedom of religion, free speech, democratic participation in electing governments at every level, equality regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation; clean water, health care, education; infrastructure that provides police services, safe roads, fire hydrants, street lights, sewers, hydro, garbage collection. The list is without end. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects basic rights and freedoms that are essential to keeping Canada a free and democratic society. It ensures that the government, or anyone acting on its behalf, doesn't take away or interfere with these rights or freedoms unreasonably. I'm not suggesting that everything is perfect here. We've got our challenges, especially in the area of systemic racism. But Canada always ranks very high when "best places to live" are named each year. I am grateful for what we have!

And I am grateful for the opportunity to express my gratitude through being generous! Fall is the time of year that we in church administration begin to think about next year's budget. In fact, you will soon receive a letter asking you to prayerfully consider how much you intend to give financially next year. As you make those decisions, remember what Paul told the Christians in Corinth in the scripture we heard today: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing

in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly.”

There are so many worthwhile things happening here in Aldershot through EPUC. I go to a restaurant and a waitress’s face lights up, “I know you. You did so and so’s funeral.” I go to the grocery store and someone goes out of his way to come over and say hi, because I did his granny’s funeral. I walk out the door after a late night in the office, behind someone who looks familiar and discover it is a former colleague from the General Council Office who sings in the chorus practicing with the symphony in Peart Hall. Our presence here is important—and is only possible through YOUR generosity. The national church does not give us money. WE pay for all that happens here! And that makes a difference in people’s lives.

In the words of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ In concrete terms, the ministries of this church are only possible through your generosity in your giving of your time, your talents, and your money. We are still here as an amazing congregation because of your generosity!

My friend’s post about the sunrise on that special morning with her son reminds me of how God works. We don’t actually see God, we see what God does. God creates a light in us and has gifted us with gratitude that can, in turn, be passed on through our generosity. Whether you find God in the faces of your family, in the stillness of a quiet place, in the sunrise that you can’t see, may gratitude and generosity—two sides of the same coin—light up your heart!

ⁱ Info on origins of Thanksgiving: <http://ndasika.hubpages.com/hub/Thanksgiving-Day-origin-and-History>, accessed on 9 October 2020.

ⁱⁱ In 1763, the people of Halifax had a day of Thanksgiving at the end of the Seven Years War. Americans who were still loyal to England during the American Revolution moved to Canada. They brought many of the customs of the American Thanksgiving along with them. Both countries have some similar customs for this time such as pumpkin pie and the cornucopia.

Parliament finally declared that November 6th would be the national holiday of Thanksgiving in the year 1879. Thanksgiving had been celebrated on many different date over the years, one of them being the 3rd Monday of October. After the end of World War I, Thanksgiving and Armistice Day were both celebrated on the Monday of the week in which November 11th occurred. In 1931, they separated the holidays and Armistice Day was then called Remembrance Day.

At long last in 1957 on January 31st, Parliament proclaimed... "A Day of General Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed ... to be observed on the 2nd Monday in October.

<http://river88.hubpages.com/hub/celebrate-thanksgiving-around-the-world/> —no longer online.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ten Pieces of Wisdom from Desmond Tutu on his Birthday: October 7, 2015, Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, accessed at <http://www.tutufoundationusa.org/2015/10/07/10-pieces-of-wisdom-from-desmond-tutu-on-his-birthday/> on 9 October 2020.