

Preaching on Thanksgiving

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Thanksgiving begins with hunger.

We don't like to think about it, but it's true. I would much rather think of Thanksgiving as that special time each year when we affirm the goodness of life and the goodness of God's blessings, that special time each year when we praise God for the bountiful earth that "bringeth forth its fruit in its season." The storehouses are full and our survival is assured for another year, "ere the winter's storms begin." Our work is done. And so it is time to celebrate and give thanks to God for the goodness of this life. It is time to count our blessings.

And yet, Thanksgiving begins with hunger, not with blessings.

Historically that is true. That first Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims at Plymouth was definitely not the harvest festival we imagine it to have been. Those Pilgrims planted three crops in the Spring of 1621: English peas, barley, and maize or Indian corn. However, as an eyewitness tells it: "our peas were not worth gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun parched them in the blossom." No peas were harvested.

The barley crop did not do much better. It is described in that eyewitness account with just one word: "indifferent." Indifferent.

It was the twenty acres of maize that did the best. But remember, these were not the hybrid ears of sugar and butter corn that we've grown accustomed to: golden yellow and ten inches long. This was native American maize, probably some two or three inches long with kernels of varying color and quality, grown in an era before modern pesticides were known. It was the sort of stuff that we wouldn't even bother to pick today. This native maize did well because Squanto had taught the English how to manure the ground with herring.

Twenty acres of scrubby corn; such was the "bountiful harvest" for which the Pilgrims gathered to give thanks. And yet, give thanks they did, because Thanksgiving begins in hunger, not in counting the blessings of the bountiful harvest.

Little did the Pilgrims know what lay ahead when they gathered to give thanks that first Thanksgiving. A second ship, the *Fortune*, was about to arrive, carrying on board thirty-five more mouths to feed. These new settlers brought no food, for they believed they would eat what the first Pilgrims had grown. When that second ship arrived, the governor of the colony "took an exact account of all their provisions in store, and proportioned the same to the number of persons, and found that it would not hold out above six months at half allowance, and hardly that." Before that second winter was over, those colonists who celebrated that first Thanksgiving had their rations reduced to just five kernels of corn per person per day. So much for the bountiful harvest!

Even though they did not know what hunger lay ahead as they gathered to give thanks that first Fall, they knew what it was like to be hungry. Physically hungry. The provisions they had brought from England had run out long ago. They were living on what little food they could catch, scrounge, or bargain for, and they had little left to bargain with. Their small boat was dispatched to the Isles of Shoals to purchase supplies from the fishermen who summered there.

When I say that Thanksgiving begins in hunger, physical hunger is not the kind

of hunger I'm talking about. There are many kinds of hunger; lack of food is just one of them. The kind of hunger I'm talking about is the kind Jesus was referring to when he said, "Blessed are those who hunger... who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

To hunger after righteousness may have many similarities with physical hunger. I don't know, because, in truth, I've never been physically hungry; really hungry. I suspect that anything I have to say about physical hunger sounds like a sixteen year old boy I once heard talk about love: everything he said was sincere and true, based on his experience, yet his words lacked the ring of authenticity. He simply had no idea of the depth of what he was talking about. So it is when most of us presume to talk about the pain of physical hunger.

Is to hunger after righteousness to suffer the same kind of pain? Is it something that gnaws at us, deep inside? Is it a restlessness that won't go away? If so, it doesn't sound inviting. And yet, if I understand Jesus correctly, he is clearly saying that to hunger after righteousness is a *good thing*! Righteousness is something we ought to hunger for, for those who hunger for it will be blessed.

Hunger is a good thing?

I attended high school in New England, where the biggest football rivalries were played on Thanksgiving Day. I remember one halftime when the coach was really angry with us for the way we were playing. He said that we weren't hungry enough to win anything. If we were ever going to be good football players, we had to hunger for victory so much that we could almost taste it. He was talking about the kind of drive, determination, and ambition it would take to get us where we wanted to go. That kind of hunger wasn't just a good thing; he said it was essential to the achievement of our goal.

Perhaps that is what Jesus means: only those who hunger after righteousness - hunger after a right relationship with God - will be blessed with the gift of that right relationship. Only those who have the drive, the determination, the gnawing restlessness deep inside, will receive the gift of righteousness.

And conversely, when we don't hunger for that right relationship; when we are satisfied with the way things are, complacent, content, then that right relationship won't come to us. To count our blessings and give thanks for the bounty of the good life we enjoy, as we are wont to do on Thanksgiving Day, may be just the very attitude, the very lack of hunger, that prevents the very righteous relationship with God that Jesus says brings satisfaction.

The Pilgrims had that hunger for righteousness. That hunger motivated them to leave their homeland, to leave family and friends behind and make that 3000 mile journey to shores of the New England they hoped to build. Of the 102 passengers who landed at Cape Cod, 51 died that first year. Many were buried in unmarked graves to conceal the loss of strength from the native Americans. Of the eight married couples who came, only three couples remained intact. None of Thomas Tinker's family made it. John and Catherine Carver both perished, as did both of Elizabeth Tilley's parents. The Brewsters took her in to live with them; she had nowhere else to go. But even that was difficult, for all they had managed to build as the winter of 1621 approached were seven rough shelters, each with two or three rooms at most. That meant an average of seven or eight persons, mostly unrelated, living in each "home." If those Pilgrims gathered around a table that first Thanksgiving, they must have been keenly aware of all the empty places left by those who had died.

If they gathered around a table to eat that first Thanksgiving meal, they would

have said a prayer of thanksgiving, a table blessing as I Timothy 4:4-5 directs. The Pilgrims were “people of the book.” The Bible was their guide to life and guide to righteousness. Elder Brewster probably would have led that prayer as the spiritual leader of the colony. There were no clergy present. The Rev. John Robinson, their beloved pastor, was still in Leyden with the majority of his flock. Thanksgiving as we have come to know it was first created and celebrated by the laity.

I often wonder what Thanksgiving prayer I would have said if that privilege had fallen to me. Would I have given thanks for that twenty meager acres of maize, knowing in my heart that it would barely take us through the winter? When I looked around at all the empty places, knowing that exactly one-half of our numbers had died; when I looked at fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Tilley, with both her parents dead; when I looked at the seven hovels in which we would have to face the next New England winter; when I looked at the sea and thought of the 3000 empty miles that separated us from our homeland and our friends - what words of thanksgiving would have welled up in my heart and sincerely crossed my lips?

And yet give sincere thanks in those desperate circumstances is exactly what those Pilgrims did, because they knew that Thanksgiving begins in hunger, not in blessings.

The closest I can come in my imagination to what the faith and spirit of those Pilgrim forebears must have been like is this passage, taken from the *Diary of Anne Frank* - that fifteen-year-old girl who wrote these words in hiding just days before her death: “It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.”

The Pilgrims gave thanks, not because of their material well-being: they had none. Not because they were surrounded by family and friends; the pain of grief and loss was heavy in their hearts. Their thanksgiving was an act of faith and a demonstration of their unshaken conviction that God was good. They gave thanks because they had a deep hunger within them - a hunger to do what God desired. They hungered after righteousness.

And to be righteous was to do what God, the faithful, loving God, required of them. Their celebration of that first Thanksgiving was an act of faith and obedience that had nothing to do with the reality of their outward circumstances. They knew the Bible. They were well familiar with the passage from Deuteronomy 26 that the lectionary lifts up. “When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God gives you....And you shall set it down before the Lord your God; and worship before the Lord your God; and you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you...and the sojourner who is among you.” (Of course they invited the sojourner, the native Americans, to be present: that’s what God commanded them to do.)

Those Pilgrims who celebrated the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth remind us of

a biblical truth: Thanksgiving begins with hunger, not with plenty. Thanksgiving begins with a hunger to walk at God's side, and not with a gratitude that God is walking next to us. Thanksgiving does not begin by counting our blessings; it is an act of faith in God's promises in spite of the outward circumstances of our lives. It begins by reciting the story of what God has done in the past to nurture and sustain us. As those Pilgrims recited the story of what God did to their forebears who sojourned in Egypt, so ought we to retell the story of faithfulness that took place at Plymouth in 1621.

Blessed are the hungry? Yes, how happy and blessed will be those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires, for God will satisfy them. And that is a cause for celebration and thanksgiving.