



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## ***\_Thanksgiving and the Gospel\_ - Thanksgiving Weekend- 11\_21\_2021***

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

As some of you know, before I took the position of being the rector of Christ church Cranbrook, I was a professor of ethics. One of the areas of my expertise was American Christianity. And so I know a lot about Thanksgiving and I know not only the history of Thanksgiving, but I also know the theology behind this tradition of Thanksgiving.

And to summarize it in a nutshell, Thanksgiving began with the Puritans when they came to New England. They would mark their time and space, not by Christmas and Easter, but by God's providence in their life. And when things went poorly for them, they would have these large meetings, these prayer services, and they called them "fast days." These were days of repentance because they assumed because things went wrong for them, that they had done something wrong. And then when things went well for them, when there was a bountiful harvest, or even a military victory, they would have thanksgiving days, they would gather the whole community and there would be a feast. They assumed that they were being blessed because they had been righteous.

And this practice of fasting and feasting, not only marked the time and space for the Puritans, but it was something that worked its way into the American mythology. And so in 1863, within the span of a single year, President Lincoln in July or maybe a bit earlier, June called for a fast day for the United States because the war was not going well with the South. And there was concern that the Union would not be preserved. And then after the Battle of Gettysburg in July, in October, Lincoln called for a feast of Thanksgiving on the final Thursday of November to thank God for preserving the country.

That feast of Thanksgiving, that national proclamation has worked its way into our observance even to this day. And I hope that this tradition is life giving for you. And I have to admit I'm a little bit excited as a person of faith whenever God is mentioned in the public sphere. I get a little excited and I think like, yeah, that's my team, God. I hope that this tradition of Thanksgiving is life-giving for you. I hope that your relatives who assemble are on their best behavior. I hope that the children do not get sick. I hope that your older relatives make it through

safely. I hope that the turkey is excellent. Not underdone, not overdone, not too dry. I hope that everything you prepare is absolutely delicious and receives the praise it is due.

And most of all, I hope that the Lions win and I realized that that's really a hope that's founded on faith rather than on facts, but we can always believe. I have a sneaking suspicion because they lose close every time, almost mysteriously. And I think this Thanksgiving is going to turn around.

There's only one small problem with Thanksgiving as we observe it. One small problem, but it's a problem. It's actually not a small problem. It's a big problem. It has nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ; absolutely nothing because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about rewards when we do well and punishments when we fail. The Gospel of Jesus Christ isn't about one covenant community that somehow has unique favor with God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that Christ has come and totally taken the place of anything that we can do as a sacrifice of our own good behavior and has come and paid the price of His own life and gave Himself on the Cross so that we might know God's grace. That grace is infinite because it comes from the love of God, which is infinite and has been given to us by God's son, Jesus.

The source of Thanksgiving in Christianity is not the cementing of a covenant or an early observance of a treaty between the Wampanoag and the pilgrims. The source of Thanksgiving in Christianity is at a different meal in which turkey is not celebrated, but bread and wine is thanked for and broken and shared. The source of Thanksgiving for Christians is the Eucharist. And the word Eucharist is itself, Greek for Thanksgiving. And the root of it is the prefix is *eu*, which means good, and the main root is *kharis*, which means grace. And those two together define not only the act of Thanksgiving, but the rite and sacrament of participating in Christ's body and blood.

And that changes the work of Thanksgiving. When we give thanks to God, it is not because we have been good, it's because God has been great. When we give thanks to God, it's not that we have somehow reformed ourselves to a point where we can meet God halfway, but rather that God always already has closed the distance with us. And God has always already in Christ Jesus, come into our midst and decided to dwell with us and define God's life where we are and who we are and as we are. That Thanksgiving we offer to God, that Eucharist, that good grace that we receive from God, that is a moment in which we respond to God by giving a little bit of ourselves, by giving something of ourselves back to echo what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus.

And we do that not because we're hoping for some special favor and not because God will somehow be thrilled, although God will be thrilled. It'll be so that we can experience that blessing and love, that good grace that comes when we place God at the center and when we give ourselves back to God. Because

when we respond to God and give God back what God has given to us, we enter into a kind of divine economy that only knows abundance and knows no scarcity, that only knows grace and knows no law. Because in Christ Jesus God's, grace is always greater than any law. God's grace is always greater than any justice. God gives us everything more than we deserve. And that helps us live through times of feasting and times of famine because Christ has pledged himself to be with us in all things and never let us alone.

So this Thanksgiving, as you observe the tradition that we have inherited, my hope is that the Thanksgiving that will run through you will be the Thanksgiving that comes from Christ. Because that Thanksgiving is not a tradition, it's an invitation to transformation. It's an invitation to make a turn in your life. It's an invitation to engage in that grace. And to know it more fully in your life because therein is abundance. Therein is the secret to thriving and not merely surviving. Therein is the joy and love and peace of God, which passes all understanding.

If we were to look for evidence of that theology of Thanksgiving that comes from Jesus, we would find it of course, in the moment in which Jesus took bread and gave thanks and broke it and gave it to His disciples and said, "This is my body." And we would find it in all the moments in the scriptures where we are told to give thanks to God always. But in my opinion, the most beautiful piece of scripture, which we strangely don't read, and our lectionary has an incredible story of Thanksgiving that brings home this point. It happens in the 27th chapter of the Book of Acts.

Paul has been arrested for preaching the resurrection of Jesus. And as he's about to go before a local judge, he says to them, I'm a Roman citizen. I have to be tried by the emperor. And so he delays the court case. He gets taken prisoner. He's placed on a large ship with all of the other prisoners being guarded by soldiers and accompanied by sailors. And they make their way to Rome and the ship founders and catches onto some ground. We don't know if it was a sandbar or a reef or something, but they are stuck.

And the soldiers and the sailors and the prisoners begin to despair. And they fast because they assume that things have gone badly because they have done something wrong. And so they're trying to appease God. But Paul says to them to do something different. And this is what we read.

"Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.' After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat."

Paul took bread and gave thanks and broke it. He celebrated the Eucharist with his captors and with his fellow prisoners and with the sailors.

"Then all of them," we read, "were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred seventy-six persons in the ship.) After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea."

So after eating, they threw their only means of sustenance in the sea. They decided to give thanks to God and to simply trust. And the boat lifted up and it was freed from the shoals and the sandbar and then promptly shipwrecked, but Paul made it to shore safely. And this, I want to suggest is a promise to us in our own Thanksgiving to not neglect to break bread and to share it, and most of all, to not neglect to give thanks to Christ. So as you observe this tradition, as you share the food, as you pass the cranberry sauce, may that Thanksgiving run through you.

And to help you along the way, and to see the point of all this, which I believe is so profound, I want to share with you an image, a story, and invite an action. Turn first to the image. If you look on your bulletin cover, and for those of you at home, I'm going to step over here so you can see it. You have an incredible painting by Edward Hicks. Hicks was a Quaker. He had a kind of *idée fixe*, to use the French, of how to portray America. And everything I've said about our wonderful nation, you can find within the embedded theology of our country, the kind of message I'm preaching today. And Hicks is one of its great expositors and this painting is one of those places where you see that message. You have a moment in which the Quakers are meeting the inhabitants of the land. And so this is a meeting between two nations.

And to the left of the painting, you have this moment in which there is peaceful trade and commerce between the two. And you see the natives holding a kind of meeting with the Quakers. And what's key here is that the Quakers themselves are translucent. The landscape is actually more real than they are. So instead of coming as a covenanted community to colonize, the Quakers came to create friendship and define God who was already there and powerfully at work.

And to the right of the painting, you have an elaborate meditation on Isaiah Chapter 11 in which you have the beasts of burden and the wolves and the lions lying with the lambs. And you have a little child leading them and that child is Jesus. And this for Hicks is an example of the peaceable kingdom, which is the title of the painting. You have that incredible promise of God coming true and the lion lying down with the lambs and the beasts of burden and the beast of prey being next to each other. And then you have at the same time, a moment, not just of promise, but of presence and reality as the Quakers meet the inhabitants and are transformed.

[Phone ringing] It's my mother, don't worry. She's just checking in on things. The story I have before you is actually a story about one of our parishioners who is hosting our first family of Afghan refugees. On Monday night, we received a young woman and her child. We learned more about her because we were able through friends of the parish to bring people who spoke fluent Dari. And she was able to tell her story for the first time in a long time.

As I went up to receive her, I have to tell you there was this incredible moment for me if Thanksgiving, because I was terrified that she would not be able to find her way down to the baggage claim. And so I went right to the part of the security gate. Sonia Pastore, who's helping us with nurturing and caring for this family came alongside me. They came around the corner, this mother and child, and they're holding hands. And I said, are you Marina? She said, yes. And Sonia turned to me and said, I am so proud of my church. And I was so grateful.

We brought them to Gerald and Margaret Mathis who have opened their home to this little family and have cared for them. And Gerald ran a bakery for many years that he called Give Thanks. And so I became curious. And so I wrote him early this week. I said, why did you call it Give Thanks? This is what he wrote to me in an email, which I want to read to you in its entirety. Gerald, just to give you a little bit of background, had been a Director of Marketing for Chrysler in Europe when he suddenly had a kind of pivot point, a time of transformation in his life and decided to become a baker, which had been his family occupation once upon the time. This is what he wrote.

"For much of the first half of the 20th century, there were Mathis bakeries dotted around the area in England called East Anglia. Eventually some 47 of them, they came to be by the efforts of my ancestors who emigrated from Germany around the turn of the century. Sadly, they were all bought up by a giant flour company, which itself became bankrupt. In 1947, all the Mathis bakeries disappeared. When word got out in England that a Mathis bakery was going to open in America, BBC Radio got ahold of me and insisted we record a program for their East Anglia feed because several thousand of their listening area members remembered the Mathis bakeries fondly.

Somewhat reluctantly, I agreed to the live interview, not the least because it was recorded at 3:00 AM in the morning due to the time difference. At the end of the radio show, the producer said you will, of course, call it the Mathis bakery, won't you? I was too sleepy at the time to contest the idea. As the bakery in Rochester started to take shape, I prayed a lot for sanity, for peace, and about a name. I balked at calling it the Mathis bakery. I wanted it to be Christ's bakery. After 39 years of battling in the business world, this was my chance to start a new chapter dedicated to God.

As I prayed, I inevitably thought about bread. And I was fixated on the fact that Jesus took bread in His hands and gave thanks, broke it and shared it with His

friends. Three steps. The first was He gave thanks. At this time, my sister Diane in England sent me a postcard to encourage me when the building's birthing was at a painful stage. The postcard was a humorous one of a big bear and the words 'Give thanks.' Diane was my junior in years, but was my senior spiritually. And so I took this as confirmation that this should be the bakery's name.

When I said this to my fellow laborers, a few cautioned that the name might turn away customers. My partner, John Mark said, 'So what? Bless him.' With the support of my good wife, Margaret, and my son, Peter, who helped build the bakery, I felt confident. And when I read Ephesians 5:20, I was certain the first thing our Lord did was give thanks before He broke bread to share with His friends."

Ephesians 5:20 says this:

"Be filled with the spirit, giving thanks to God, the father, at all times, and for everything in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.?"

It's written on the inside of this bakery, which continues today through some new parishioners who are running it.

Finally, I want you to think about what we're about to do as we turn in our pledges. So many of you are new, I want to say a little bit about what we do when we pledge. A pledge is merely an estimate of what you can give to the church. It enables all the work we do, and a pledge fundamentally, spiritually for you is a moment in which you give thanks. It's a moment in which you step into that infinite love that comes from Christ. And so we're going to give you an opportunity to come forward with your pledge a little bit like we did the other day when we all came forward and thanked God for the blessings of the people who had been in our lives, who have passed away.

We want to give you this moment to come forward because this act of Thanksgiving is meant to be a time of transformation, a time of new beginning, a time in which you realize in a powerful way, God's infinite love for you in Jesus Christ. May it be so. May it be so. May it be so today and always in this week.

Amen.