

## “Celebrating Eucharist”

### Introduction

“We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessings,” we sang at the beginning of the service. Now if we were gathering as Pilgrims of old, we would have assembled outside, called together with the beating of a drum or the blowing of a conch shell.

We would have processed in together. But once inside the men and boys over 16 would have sat on one side, the women and children on the other side. There was no mixed seating.

There was no choir and no organ or any other musical instrument. So the psalm for the day would have been sung without accompaniment.

There was no heat, like worship here last Sunday. The women would have brought in their bags some heated foot rocks. Oh, if we had only had those last Sunday.

On the pulpit there would be an hourglass that was turned each time the sands of a full hour ran out. In a typical Puritan service, the hourglass was turned two to three times.

How did the Pilgrims survive so long a service? Well, down at the front there would have been a couple of individuals called tything men. The tything men carried long sticks, tipped on one end with a brass knocker to rap sleeping males and on the other end with a rabbit’s foot or feather for a gentler waking of sleeping females. No one was permitted to sleep and no one was permitted to leave until the service ended.

We will not be imposing those traditions today. But there is one tradition that we will follow. As a mark of respect for scripture, the congregation stood while the minister read the text for the day’s sermon.

So I invite you to take a Bible and turn to John 6:25, page 119 in the New Testament section of the pew Bible, and stand for the reading of the scripture.

John 6:25-35

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

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Our American holiday of Thanksgiving is about how, almost 400 years ago, Pilgrims came to this land looking for freedom from religious persecution. Their first winter here was so harsh that by the end of it, almost half of them had died from the cold or starvation.

It was only through the guidance of some local Native Americans that they learned how to hunt, to fish, to plant crops and live off the land. By the next autumn, the harvest from the fields was enough that the Pilgrims did

not have to fear the winter ahead. So they had a celebration with the Native Americans to thank God that they had survived and could survive.

Yet the idea of a Thanksgiving celebration was not new with the Pilgrims. The celebration of harvest goes back all the way to Jewish heritage, to the Feast of Shelters, as recorded in the Old Testament.

Throughout history, generations have come to the time of harvest, gathered up the fruits of their labors and thanked God, knowing that if they had not harvested enough food to put back for the winter months, they would not survive.

## II

In our day of processed foods and a global food chain, we do not have that harvest it or don't make it situation. When we come to Thanksgiving and look toward winter, we wonder about the condition of the furnace or whether to get a flu shot. And then sometimes there are complex trials in our lives that lead us to wonder: Do I have the resources within me to survive another winter?

I am aware of how hollow it sounds for a minister to get up on the Sunday before Thanksgiving and tell everybody to count their blessings. Some folks may not be able to count very high.

I know it is possible to have a totally miserable Thanksgiving. This holiday where so much focus is on family and togetherness can be very painful when there is an empty chair at the table, whether it is from illness or death or estrangement or just distance. The emptiness and hunger from loss can be far greater than any physical hunger.

In our text Jesus has miraculously fed 5,000 people with five small barley loaves and two fish. He saw the hunger of the people, and he met their need. Now the crowd has followed Jesus all the way around the lake expecting to be fed again.

But Jesus tells them what he has to offer them is greater than food that satisfies physical hunger. He brings that which comes from heaven and gives life to the world.

"We do not understand," the people say. "Are you like Moses when he gave the Israelites bread from heaven, manna, in order to help them survive in the wilderness?"

"It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven," Jesus says "it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." The bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, life that is more than physical.

## II

Of all the commentaries I have read about Thanksgiving this season, the one that has touched me most is not by an individual like most of us, descendants from varied stock of immigrants to this land. It is written by a woman named Jacqueline Keeler.

"I am a Native American," Keeler writes, "and I celebrate Thanksgiving. That often surprises those who wonder what Native Americans think of this official U.S. celebration of the survival of early arrivals in a European invasion that culminated in the death of 10 to 30 million native people.

"Thanksgiving has never been just about the Pilgrims. [It is about survival.] As a child of a Native American family, I learned that I was part of a very select group of survivors. Indeed, when I give thanks this Thursday and I cook my native food, I will be thinking of how my ancestors survived and how each of us must be the ones who work to destroy the evil hearts in this world. Because if we can survive, with our ability to share and to give intact, then the evil and the good will that met that Thanksgiving Day in the land of the Wam-pa-no-ag will have come full circle. And the healing can begin." (Jacqueline Keeler, "Thanksgiving: A Native American View," posted on AlterNet.org, December 31, 1999.)

## Conclusion

In a few minutes we are going to celebrate the sacrament we call Communion or the Lord's Supper. Sometimes that meal is called the Eucharist. Perhaps we should use that term more often, because "Eucharist" literally means "thanksgiving."

A meal with Jesus is always a meal of thanksgiving. John says that before Jesus fed the 5,000 he first lifted the loaves and fish and gave thanks. At our meal today Lynn will say to us: "Lift up your hearts." And we will respond, "We lift them to the Lord." She will say, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." And we will say, "It is right to give our thanks and praise."

And we will remember the words from Paul when he says, "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

Do you see? Even if we do not feel like giving thanks, our Lord through this meal gives thanks for us. May this Eucharist meal today be

our family Thanksgiving meal, our celebration of survival in Christ. Through it may we receive the bread of heaven that endures for eternal life. Amen.