

The Story of Thanksgiving
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Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. It's the time of year where we, as Canadians, give thanks for the food that farmers across our nation have grown and harvested, give thanks for the health and well-being of our friends and family, and then often bring those two things together with a big meal shared with one another. The celebration is a wonderful opportunity to gather with those we love and are particularly thankful for, to consider or meditate upon the things we are thankful for in our lives, and if you're the parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle or close friend to a small child, it's also an opportunity to fill the front of your fridge with turkey or pumpkin related crafts.

Thanksgiving didn't always exist in this form, though. Thanksgiving in its early days was not a time to gather and list the things we're thankful for, but a time to give thanks to God for providing all those things. Today our national Thanksgiving holiday is a secular holiday. Now, that's not to say that we, as Christians, don't think of it as a day to celebrate within the context of our own religion, which is good, because Thanksgiving in the past was a religious holiday.

The first official nationally recognized Thanksgiving was celebrated in the Province of Canada in 1859. It was organized at the bidding of leaders of the Protestant clergy and was intended for the "public and solemn" recognition of God's mercies.¹

However, if we go back further, some consider the first Thanksgiving held by Europeans in North America to be when Martin Frobisher and his crew arrived in the Eastern Arctic in 1578. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, "they ate a meal of salt beef, biscuits and mushy peas to celebrate and give thanks for their safe arrival in what is now Nunavut. They celebrated Communion and formally expressed their thanks through the ship's chaplain who, according to explorer Richard Collinson, 'made unto them a godly sermon, exhorting them especially to be thankfull to God for theyr strange and miraculous deliverance in those so dangerous places [sic].'"²

Of course, giving thanks for food, for harvest, for the Provider, this also happened long before Europeans settled on this land. The Indigenous peoples in North America have a history of holding communal feasts in celebration of the fall harvest that predates the arrival of European settlers.

¹ The Canadian Encyclopedia, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thanksgiving-day>

² The Canadian Encyclopedia, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thanksgiving-day>

There is a long history in this nation of people gathering together to give thanks. And though we often associate Thanksgiving with turkey and squash, with friends and family, with lists of thanks and a long weekend, giving thanks has deep Biblical roots.

In our passage from Deuteronomy, Moses lays out the way in which the people should celebrate the first harvest in the promised land. And why? Because they've been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. This would be the first harvest in the place that God promised to the Israelites. This would be a time to not only celebrate the food grown, and the fact that they could continue to grow food on the same land for years to come, but also the fact that it all stems from God and God's love and goodness to them as a people. The harvest is a gift from God.

Moses includes another facet to this thanksgiving, as well; the people are to recount the narrative of their deliverance from Egypt and entry into the land. The storytelling aspect of this procedure, given to a new generation of Israelites who are called to be faithful to the covenant with their God, is such a strong reminder of how deep their gratitude should run. Without story, this law could have very quickly become just that: a law; a rule to be followed; a ritual to enact based on expectation. But narration involves our imaginations; it helps listeners to place themselves within that history, that story of who you are and why you are here—it is part of your faith, your belief in God who creates, who loves, who is merciful and gracious.

As God's people today, rituals have changed and evolved. While we still celebrate the harvest, we tend not to recall the story of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt and entrance into the promised land. While this piece of Jewish history is important, our history as Christians points to something different: instead of a desert, a cross; instead of a promised land, a promised kingdom.

When we look at our gospel passage for today, John presents us with a scene of a crowd who, not long before, experienced Jesus feeding 5000 with just a few loaves and fishes. But we quickly discover that the crowd is not seeking Jesus once more because their eyes were opened through the sign he performed, but because they want to fill their bellies with more bread. Their interest in Jesus is focused more on the material outcomes of following him rather than engaging with Jesus and his gospel message more deeply.

How often have we boxed ourselves into the same dilemma? Or known others who have? This dilemma of being hugely interested in the by-products of Christianity but hardly interested in Christianity itself. There are times where it would be so much easier if Jesus were to just judge and divide all things equally, increasing our share; if he would

give us loaves and fishes, better houses, shorter hours, bigger wages, gadgets to lessen our work and add to our leisure. For many, these things are well worth having and following Jesus in order to gain. But that is not the life Jesus desires for us.

Jesus sees what the crowd *really* wants. Their desire for bread that is perishable—that is, for material things, for things that would make life easier, for easy answers—is palpable. So, he tells them to instead seek food that endures for eternal life. Food from the Son of Man, whom God sends.

The crowd's ears perk up at this. Is Jesus saying that he will give *them* the power to summon bread, just as Jesus can? Bread forever? So they ask, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Again, the crowd is missing what Jesus means. There isn't a set of laws or rules that they can follow word for word. This isn't a case of multitudinous legal works required by Judaism. It's not a performance that one executes in exchange for eternal life. It isn't a case of Jesus setting out a structure to follow and a narration to recite in the way their ancestor Moses had done. The *work* Jesus refers to is the act of believing: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." But what does it mean to truly believe?

Belief shapes who we are. Belief connects to our core being. Our personalities, our speech patterns, our thoughts and motives, they all flow from our beliefs. If one thinks of a refugee as a person likely to take a job away from a Canadian citizen, they will treat that refugee accordingly. If a refugee is to that person a great child of God, then whole departments of one's life will take another colour and be lived differently. If we think of the earth as something to be exploited to serve ourselves or the economy, we will treat the earth accordingly. If the earth is God's created gift to us, then earth becomes a responsibility we are driven to preserve, care for, and marvel over.

When Jesus speaks of believing it is rooted in, not just the history of God and God's people, but in who God created each and every one of us to be. Believing is rooted in how we choose to either embrace or brush aside that "work," as it were, to believe in more than material items and good days ahead. Believing accepts the hard work of living in a world where not all our neighbours choose to live with generosity, mercy, or love, but we are willing to continue to live for the bread of life, to have faith, even when it is difficult. Believing, in other words, isn't so much about laws or rules, but about the all too human capacity to *feel*.

The crowd with Jesus still cannot quite grasp this. When Jesus tells them all they have to do is believe in him, in the Son of Man, they ask for another sign. They want to know what Jesus' credentials are. Why should they be allegiant to Jesus; why should they

give their devotion to him? Sure, he fed 5000 in the desert with very few resources, but what of it? Their ancestor Moses fed their people in the wilderness with manna from heaven. What Jesus offers isn't unique. Why should they turn from Moses to Jesus? So Jesus makes the situation a little more clear. He explains to them that it was not Moses who made that manna fall from heaven, it was God. And it is God, now, who has made this Bread of Life come from heaven, as well. Everything, *everything*, comes from God, the Father, the Creator. And this life God gives is for all Jews and for the whole world.

With this knowledge, something changes in the crowd: their human need and human longing kicks in. They *need* this eternal bread. They *feel* this need deep within. And Jesus is there to provide it. Only he can meet the hunger of the soul.

On a weekend such as this, a weekend where we gather with others, eat delicious food, decorate with cornucopias of harvested goods, why do we give thanks? The Israelites followed Moses' lead and gave thanks for their first harvest in the promised land, telling the story of their people's escape from slavery and trials in the desert because it was a way to point to God, a way to focus on the One who provides for them. Today, we give thanks because our food, our nourishment, is eternal. Jesus is the bread of life who feeds our souls, sees our longing, meets our felt human needs. God gives us a harvest to celebrate and eat together, but more than that, God gives us a Saviour who yields eternal life.

How do we give thanks? Not by following a prescribed outline, set of rules, or laws, but through feeling: accepting what is felt and understood at our core. We give thanks because we believe. And like the Israelites, we narrate a story. We engage our imaginations and our feelings. We come together at a table and we tell the story of a man who both broke bread and was bread. We tell the story of a man who passed a cup and poured out his cup. We tell the story of a man who gave us all life eternal and whose only request in return was that we believe. It is the story of Thanksgiving: our reason for giving thanks, our way of giving thanks. Thanks be to the living bread. Thanks be to God. Amen.