

Nov 27, 2019

Rev. Jane Florence

Thanksgiving Service

Text: Joshua 11:20-23, Psalm 100

Title: "Transformative Thanksgiving"

As a child my favorite part of school was not the playground. The playground was a vast acreage of sandy dirt, thorny mesquite trees, big creepy bugs, and tremendous heat. I grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. Recess was sending children out to play with scorpions in the desert. My favorite time of school was craft time. Keep your tether ball and scoring heat; give me glue, scissors and construction paper and I can create the world. Crafts were an integral part of all lessons in elementary school. In science, we made planets of styrofoam balls connected to coat hanger solar systems. To learn about weather, we cut out construction paper orange leaves and cotton ball snowmen which taught us mythical seasonal changes in far away lands "up north". In social studies there was a craft to go with every holiday and lesson. Dioramas of Indian villages, paper mache Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria, pilgrim hats and Indian feathered headbands, that's how we learned history.

We learned that Columbus discovered America. We learned that Pilgrims and Puritans left England and came to the new world for religious freedom. We learned that Indians taught the Pilgrims to plant a fish with their corn, and that they all sat down together with Turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, green bean casserole, and cranberry jello salad. (or something close) Sometime during dinner, the Pilgrims taught the Indians about God and how to be Good Christian Americans. Our history lessons also included that the Europeans also subdued the wilderness and later fought the savage Indians that lived in the wild. When the fighting was too much, Puritan minister Increase Mather wrote in his journal, "God ended the controversy by sending the small pox amongst the Indians. Whole towns of them were swept away, in some of them not so much as one Soul escaping the Destruction." In the words of our history books, the Europeans had much to celebrate at Thanksgivings because God had delivered them to new lands and cleared the way for them to have it all for themselves. In other words, American children have been taught for decades that this land is our land because God wanted us to have it. The native Indians died because God killed them so we could have their land. Thanks be to God.

It sounds a bit crass to hear it that way these days. It's the way the winners tell the story of land ownership- not just in North American, but for all times. The winners get to write the history (usually because they have exterminated the others, and dead people don't get to write much history). It's really not so different in other cultures such as our Hebrew ancestor's story told centuries before our own. The book of Joshua tells a story of Israelites moving through vast lands and killing all natives in it. It tells the Hebrew history of how their nation formed just as ours tells of how we formed. It is the same one we repeated. when their children asked, "where did we get our land? how did we get here?" Their answer was: "God gave it to us. God wanted us to have it." If you read the fine print stories, it says "God told us to kill everyone who lived on it already, so it could be our land of milk and honey."

The text of Joshua tells: "For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses." And it was

so. Problem with these stories is the egocentrism of it all. They announce God is on our side. We thank God for destruction of others, so we could be so blessed.

What a strange world we live in.

There are other stories. There are other truths not often told about Middle Eastern lands or Thanksgiving in America. The first non-Native settlers in this country were African slaves left behind by Spaniards who abandoned a settlement attempt after massacring the French Protestants who had settled briefly in present day Florida. The African slaves did not write the story. Spanish Jews settled in New Mexico in the late 1500s. They did not write our history.

Before the Pilgrims landed on the Mayflower, English and French fishermen had fished off the Massachusetts coast for decades. It is likely that these fishermen transmitted illnesses to the natives who had no resistance to them. Within three years the plague wiped out between 90 to 96 percent of the native inhabitants of coastal New England. Governor John Winthrop, of Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote, “but for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles pace the greatest part of them are swept away by the small pox ... So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place.”

An English colonist’s journal tells of the Puritans finding Native homes, “having their guns and hearing nobody, they entered the houses and found the people were gone. The sailors took some things .. we had meant to have left some beads in the house to show we were of peace... but we didn’t do it because we left in such as haste. but as soon as we can meet with the Indians, we will pay them for what we took....”

The pilgrims also wrote, “the next morning we found a place like a grave. We decided to dig it up. We found first a mat, and under that a fine bow.... we also found bowls, trays, dishes and things like that. We took several of the pretties things to carry away with us, and covered the body up again” Grave-robbing Pilgrims never made it into the history books or the color sheets of my classrooms.

As for that corn that the Indians taught the Pilgrims to plant, the colonist wrote in their journals, “we march to a place we called Cornhill, where we had found the corn before. We dug and found some more corn, two or three baskets full, and a bag of beans... we had about ten bushels, which will be enough for seed for us. It was with God’s help that we found this corn....” It is as though they never gave a thought to whose corn it was they were stealing.

Their writings tell how Pilgrims did not arrive on a wilderness land of dense forest in need of backbreaking labor of clearing land of forest and rock, but came into space that had already been cleared and settled, already with corn planted in rows, already with homes built and left vacant by the plagues.

All these added details does not mean Thanksgiving is bad; no one needs to boycott Thanksgiving tomorrow. The theology of Thanksgiving- of pausing to give thanks- of bringing to our awareness all that we have to be grateful for - Living in Gratitude is not a bad thing.

But it is also only fair to notice that what we are often thankful for is how we are privileged, so we also need notice that our privilege came then - as it does now- at other’s expense.

Our privilege comes to us at the expense of the extinction of Native peoples, the robbery of their graves and the continued desecration of their sacred sites today. Our privilege comes to us still at the expense of the extinction of entire species. Our privilege comes at the pollution of land, water and air. As James Loewen writes, “the antidote to feel-

good history is not feel-bad history but honest and inclusive history.” And the antidote for Pilgrim and Indian origin myths is not to throw out Thanksgiving. It is to throw out arrogance of American exceptionalism and to reclaim a larger lens of gratitude.

There are other stories than can inform our lives and our living. We can look to other stories as well, other stories in our faith tradition also such as Psalm 100.

It is God who made us, and we are God’s;  
we are God’s people  
Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving,  
and God’s courts with praise.

Give thanks to God. For the Lord is good

Reading the psalms also remind us of Hebrew understanding of a Creator God who made all people, and all animals, and all plants, and water and air and earth and mountains. And creation is good. It is God who made grass for animals to eat and sunshine and rain for earth’s fruitfulness. God who ordered creation that *all* may live in unity with one another.

To enter into a state of gratitude living, a true thanksgiving is to and enter into a transformative thanksgiving whereby we notice our blessings and we notice our privilege, and in response, we don’t just keep taking and say, I’ll have more Potatoes please. A Theology of Transformative Thanksgiving is reexamining our attitudes to understand that the earth is not ours to exploit, but to care for. In a transformative Thanksgiving, we acknowledge and confess our takings and humbly offer restitutions to those we take from, and give true honor and care to those exploited for others gain. Transformative Thanksgiving is not about Black Friday sales, launching Christmas shopping, watching endless football games, or entering into a stuffed turkey-pumpkin pie comma.

Transformative Thanksgiving is recognizing Divine Goodness does bless and desires all others to be blessed as well – where there is food for all, clean water for all, safe homes and schools and neighborhoods for all. It is oceans that aren’t polluted, and air that is safe to breathe. Transformative Thanksgiving is living mindfully knowing that the same Divine God who blesses one people blesses all at no ones expense or extinction.

If we truly live in a Transformative Thanksgiving, let us live in generosity and in love for all. May it be so,

\* With appreciation to James W. Loewen. “The Truth About the First Thanksgiving” (Chapter 3) *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. New York: Simon Schuster, 2007.