

## Being Thankful and Rethinking Thanksgiving

Colossians 3:12-15

November 20, 2022

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.*

NRSV Colossians 3:14-15

### NEW REGALIA FOR A NEW LIFE

*The Great Spirit has chosen you to be his holy and deeply loved children, so put on the new regalia he has provided for you. Put on deep feeling for the pain of others, kindness, humbleness of heart, gentleness of spirit, and be patient with one another. If there are any complaints against each other, then carry that burden basket and learn to forgive. For we must forgive others in the same manner that our Honored Chief has freely forgiven us.*

*When all this new regalia is in place, let the love of the Great Spirit gather all the loose threads and braid them together in unity with one another. Let the Chosen One guide you on the path of peace and harmony, and then as his one body this peace will be the guiding light in your hearts as you give thanks to the Great Spirit.*

Colossians 3:12-15

First Nations Versions

Thanksgiving. There are so many ways we celebrate it. What comes up for you when you think about celebrating Thanksgiving as children? as adults? places you have lived? who has been at the table? Past Thanksgivings - Maybe there are joyful memories. Maybe there are painful memories.

And this year. A time of being with other people finally after Covid restrictions have changed? An empty chair at the table of someone we love whom we have lost. Maybe it is a time of welcoming someone to the table, the family, to a circle of friends. This year – will there be a big meal or small? Alone or with friends or family? Turkey or alternative? Go for a hike? watch football? Go to a restaurant? Potluck?

And the symbols of the story or stories of Thanksgiving. Depending when or where we grew up, we learned stories about the First Thanksgiving, early traditions, symbols. Who the people were. Pilgrims.... Indians.... a meal shared...faith and spiritual traditions.

Today as we sing and pray about gratitude to God, there are invitations. An invitation to:

- Consider how the practice of giving thanks can grow and deepen and change.
- Consider our understanding and celebration of Thanksgiving can and needs to grow and deepen and evolve and change

Let's consider the practice of giving thanks at the time of Paul's writing.

Were people living lives of gratitude to God in Colossae at the time of early followers of Jesus? Paul must have wondered about this when he wrote his letter to the Colossians, a group of followers of Jesus' Way living along a main roadway in Asia Minor - what is now modern Turkey. They were pulled between the values of their faith and the values of their culture, much as we are today. In Colossians 2, Paul warned them, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

These words ring true today. We know the philosophy of trying to spend ourselves out of economic troubles. The empty deceit of a sales pitch. The human tradition of making the holidays overindulgence in food or alcohol or other kinds of consumption.

Paul is not scolding. He is the apostle and teacher of gratitude, with the phrase "be thankful" as one of his recurring pleas (3:15). New Testament scholar David Pao points out that the New Testament has 62 mentions of giving thanks, and Paul is responsible for more than three-quarters of them. He is thankful for God's grace, for the blinding moment of grace that changed his life from persecuting followers of Jesus to coming to believe in Jesus and starting churches. He was a person of deep gratitude to God. And this gratitude spills over in his life.

This holds true in letter to Colossians. Paul begins with an outpouring of thanks, saying, "In our prayers for you, we always thank God, ... for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints" (1:3-4).

While he gives thanks for them, he also writes about the transformation that is happening in people as they share prayer, food around the table, learn about Jesus' teachings, experience the presence of the Spirit with them. They are walking a new path. They receive new clothing, new regalia – feeling the pain of others, kindness, humbleness, gentleness, patience. Woven together in unity with one another in community. This ongoing experience is leads to lives of gratitude and giving thanks to the Holy One.

The letter to the Colossians does not assume that we show gratitude only when everything is good. Instead, Paul knows that there will be much hardship to endure at the same time that we are giving thanks.

Holding thanksgiving and hardship together is a spiritual challenge. We struggle to give thanks after the death of someone we love. We try to be grateful when a child or grandchild is sick or is struggling with depression or addiction. We do our best to count our blessings when we lose a job, suffer an injury, are diagnosed with serious illness or experience a crushing disappointment.

And yet, we can find ways to go on this path. Often when I talk with people, there is both an honesty about sadness, feelings of loss and grief. And they talk about the gifts of God that

sustain them through the struggles of life: friends, partners, church family, kindness, generosity, prayer, spiritual practices and gratitude to the Holy One for the gift of life itself.

We can look back at ways we have changed in the midst of joys and sorrows. I like how the First Nations Version offers titles themes for the sections that reflect Paul's description of transformation in our lives - Things that must die - Walking a new path - New regalia for a new life - Dancing our prayers.

Things that must die... so that we can put on that new regalia and dance our prayers of gratitude. Something that must die is our old and wrong understandings of the first Thanksgiving. I keep thinking about what I learned in grade school. We learned a sanitized story told from one side, the white side.

I am grateful to Janet Pollack and others who have been providing me with good resources about rethinking Thanksgiving. I want some new spiritual practices around this story, around my respect for Indigenous peoples, around lament for the evil that was done, and around prayers to the Holy One for a deeper experience of daily gratitude.

As the story typically goes, the relationship between the Wampanoags and the Plymouth colonists was one of friendship, sealed with a feast of mutual gratitude. In this version of the story, the United States was founded on this goodwill, with the blessing of God. For generations, schoolchildren have rehearsed this myth with pageants featuring Pilgrim hats, Indian feathers, and turkey crafts.

But David Silverman, a history professor at George Washington University, summarizes the true relationship between the Wampanoags and the Europeans this way in his book *This Land Is Their Land*:

The European mariners called "ex-plorers" by historians were in fact slavers who raided the Wampanoag coast for years before the Pilgrims' arrival, capturing people for sale to distant places of which they had never heard. The Plymouth colonists were no better, despite their claims to piety. They introduced themselves to the Wampanoags by robbing seed corn from underground storage barns.

An unknown disease ripped through the Wampanoags communities between 1616 and 1619, leaving a devastating silence in the historical record. Eventually the Wampanoag leaders decided to collaborate with the colonists. They were desperate.

Despite their vulnerability to illness, the Wampanoags were the stronger people when the Europeans first arrived. The native people could have easily driven the colonists away. Out of desperation, the Wampanoags created this alliance with the English "planned for the two peoples to live side by side." The native peoples believed they were sharing the gifts of the land—and sharing in the responsibility to care for it. But those agreements about land were not honored by the English.

The Wampanoags acted with creativity and strength to survive the trauma of the epidemics and the colonists' betrayals. They lived in communal ways with one another and the land.

Yet, the Europeans refused to see the Wampanoags and other native peoples of the area as whole people, with complex and nuanced cultures. The truth is that hundreds of native people were executed and thousands sold into slavery, there was kidnapping of children and the loss of languages, and the generations trapped in cycles of debt and poverty.

I mourn that in the myth of the first Thanksgiving, the role of the first peoples is to welcome the newcomers, to give them their land, and then to disappear. But here is part of the real history and I am grateful. Despite all the attempts of colonizers past and present to demean, kill, betray, enslave, and erase native people, they are still here. In recent years, the Wampanoags fought for, and received, federal recognition for their remaining communities. They are reviving their language, recovering some of their land, and reclaiming their sovereignty. They were and are people of resilience, a deep connection to the land, and daily gratitude to the land, the Holy One. We have much to learn. I want that to be part of my Thanksgiving.

As people who live on the land of the Miwok, we are invited to talk and act in ways that reflect the power and presence of the Great Spirit, the Holy One, the Source of Love and Life. We can sing songs of giving thanks for all things living and be grateful for the wisdom Native Peoples. The Thanksgiving Speech as part of our reading today is something I will use this week in my own devotions and reflections. Such a deep sense of gratitude to so many parts of creation.

How might our practice of giving thanks and talking with children and grandchildren about Thanksgiving move us in a direction of deeper awareness, repentance, and transformation as people who are putting on new regalia for a new life in Christ?

Let us choose gratitude each day and choose a more truthful story of Thanksgiving. Amen.

First Nations Version of the New Testament

<https://firstnationsversion.com/book/first-nations-version/>

Henry Brinton, "The Death of Thanksgiving" (COLOSSIANS 1:11-20), Sojourners, Nov. 18, 2013

<https://sojo.net/articles/scripture-death-thanksgiving-colossians-111-20>

Jane McBride, "Shattering the myth of the first Thanksgiving," Nov. 13, 2020

<https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/shattering-myth-first-thanksgiving>

Resource list

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRiXnXl28BApY2AYXcJrqRbZ5Ri8JIQdc8IcV-loqk7OK8BkskxncNE6-QX5IQYup6O-GITpEJDdIK/pub>