

Thanksgiving Meal

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 & Exodus 16:9-18

Call to Worship: Psalm 34:1-8

November 7, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

If you want to get our daughter Rachel, riled up, all you need to do is put up your Christmas decorations too early. In her opinion, “too early” is anytime before Thanksgiving Day. She’s really kind of an old fashioned stickler about this. She was beside herself when some stores and—worse, some neighbors—had outdoor decorations up before Halloween, even. If you haven’t driven through Waelder lately, I’ll let you know that they started putting up Christmas trees on the lightpoles on Main Street the week before Halloween. I don’t know whether to blame it on the pandemic, but it sure seems like the commercial aspects of Christmas, at least, are creeping earlier and earlier into the fall. I have my suspicions about some reasons for this, but that’s another sermon. What gets Rachel’s goat is what I want to talk about for these next three Sundays before Advent begins, and it is this: she says “What happened to Thanksgiving? Are we just skipping it? Thanksgiving deserves some notice, too!” And she’s exactly right.

A few jack-o-lanterns have been replaced by turkeys and pilgrims this week in our neighborhood—Daisy and I took a unscientific survey—but as Thanksgiving Day gets closer and closer, the Santas and snowmen and light and trees will multiply quickly. It is easy to overlook Thanksgiving, it is easy to go straight from Reese’s peanut butter cups to visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads. I decided to preach a Thanksgiving sermon series, which is going to be three Sundays long, for several reasons: but this is one, that we tend to overlook Thanksgiving and thus giving thanks, to rush it as part of our headlong rush to Christmas, don’t give it the time and attention it deserves.

So you’ll know where I think we’re headed for these next three weeks, this is what I have in mind, though you already know I’m apt to change my mind when the Spirit leads me in a different direction. This week is “Thanksgiving Meal,” and we’ll be talking about the sacrament of communion as a meal of thanksgiving, in part. Next week is “Thanksgiving Prayer,” and I think we’ll talk both about prayers of thanksgiving as well as giving thanks for prayer itself. And then we’ll wrap up, the week before Thanksgiving Day, with “Thanksgiving Gifts,” which will be about the gifts we both give and receive by living a life of gratitude.

A Thanksgiving meal. That’s this table, this meal, this bread and this juice. A Thanksgiving meal is the people that share the meal with us, whether they are in the sanctuary or in their own spaces. This is a meal of thanksgiving, a meal that invites our thanks and a meal that sends us out to spread gratitude.

One of the earliest names for the sacrament of communion was Eucharist, and it’s a name that lots of churches still use. It comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” So for instance, in verse 24 of the passage from 1 Corinthians, the words that we typically use as the words of institution when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gives thanks, and it’s the “eucharisto” verb there. Same with the feeding of the 5000 stories, Jesus gives thanks before he distributes the bread, and it’s the same word. Same thing in Luke’s version of the Last Supper.

Giving thanks, then, blessing, was at the heart of the Last Supper, was really at the heart of Jesus’s ministry, and still remains at the heart of the sacrament. The church added various other meanings to the meal—remembrance, sacrifice, self-examination, proclamation, fellowship. But from the beginning, from its roots in Jesus’s meals with his followers, from its beginning as the last meal of the disciples with Jesus, from its first institution in the early church, it has been a meal of thanksgiving.

Churches with more formal liturgies than we usually have, pray what is called the “Great Prayer of Thanksgiving” at the table. You’ve probably heard it—maybe previous pastors used it. It starts off

“The Lord be with you. *And also with you.* Lift up your hearts. *We lift them up to the Lord.* Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. *It is right to give our thanks and praise.*” That’s the responsive beginning to the prayer. And it’s all about calling us to the table with thanksgiving. The formal prayer comes in various forms from there, depending on the particular day or season or special occasion. Our Book of Common Worship does allow for what it is that I do, which is pray an extemporaneous prayer. We’re instructed express “thankful praise to God” for a whole list of things: God’s work in creation and providence, and in covenant history; witness of the prophets; God’s steadfast love in spite of human failure; ultimate gift of Christ; and for the occasion or special celebration. But that’s not all. The instructions go on, to continue with “a thankful recalling of the acts of salvation in Jesus Christ,” including Christ’s birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection; his intercession for us right now and the promise of his coming again; and for the gift of the sacrament. You can judge for yourselves how well I do any or all of that. The prayer ends with calling upon the Holy Spirit, which is not specifically put in terms of thanksgiving as the rest of the prayer is.

Anyway you look at it, it’s a meal of thanksgiving: big, encompassing thanksgiving. When we remember all that God has done, not just for us as individuals, but for us as God’s people, for all people. When we remember all of who Jesus was and is. For every thing we remember, we give thanks and gratitude and praise.

Friends, a lot of us are in a rough season right now. There’s been a lot of loss, a lot of strain and worry, a lot of sense of impending doom, or the other shoe going to drop. I don’t think it’s just me feeling that way. Those feelings are valid and true and worth talking about and caring about.

We bring those feelings to the table. And. Not but. And. We pray a great prayer of thanksgiving, remembering *all* that God has done. And our feelings of gratitude are also real and valid and true and worth talking about and caring about.

As we gather today, around our various tables, let’s remember, with gratitude, that this is God’s table, that God loves us beyond measure, that God cares about our rough seasons, that the generations before us shared the same thanksgivings that we do, and passed them along to us. Let us come to this thanksgiving meal with gratitude in our hearts.