

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 28, Year B, November 18, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Giving Thanks"

Thanksgiving will soon be here; for many it is a day of eating too much and nodding off to sleep, or spending hours in front of the TV; it's hard to see how that translates directly into giving thanks; so maybe we can rethink just a bit what we are about to do this week for Thanksgiving and possibly celebrate it with a bit more attention paid to how much we are actually ... giving thanks

first there may be a couple of differences of opinion about Thanksgiving that need to be cleared up; the main images we associate with Thanksgiving are probably the Pilgrims in their tall hats and buckle shoes; remember, those were the Pilgrims who left England seeking religious freedom: and who were they seeking religious freedom from?: from us, the Church of England, the church that the Episcopal Church grew out of

but others will say that it wasn't the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts that inaugurated the first Thanksgiving meal in 1621, but rather Church of Englanders (yay, our church) at Berkeley Plantation just down on the James River in Virginia (yay, our state) in 1619 - 3 years before the Plymouth Colony; any Berkeley partisans here?; the only problem with the Berkeley claim to being the first Thanksgiving is that the group's charter required them to observe annually the anniversary of their arrival in the New World with a day of prayer and ... fasting - not feasting!; I don't think I'd have much luck suggesting that you not eat your turkey and fixins on Thursday, much less that you not eat anything at all on that day

and, remember, I'm not a Virginian, but a Floridian; so I might want to point out an additional historical precedent for the first Thanksgiving: that of the Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Avile whose men celebrated their safe arrival in Florida in 1565 (54 years before Berkeley) with Holy Communion on the beach as soon as they arrived to give thanks to God and had a special meal of thanksgiving; but they didn't speak English, and they were Catholics, so most people don't give them any consideration

if we really want to locate the origins of an annual holy day of giving thanks, we have to go back even further in time and leave the Western Hemisphere

behind; I'm thinking about the Biblical harvest festival of giving thanks, called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, described in Leviticus ch. 23; the Feast of Booths was seven days that the Hebrew people observed by living outdoors, in open framed structures, with loose branches as a roof, as is still done by many observant Jews; it was a reminder, after the harvest had been offered to God, of how the people had relied on God alone during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness; God didn't want them to get so comfortable in the land of milk and honey that they would forget about him, or forget that they themselves were not responsible for the bounty they had received; so their way of giving thanks was to do without some of their comforts for a week

what effect might it have on us to sleep outside for a week at this time of year, with all of our neighbors doing the same thing?; imagine how this might increase our empathy for our homeless brothers and sisters who don't have any choice but to rough it outdoors; imagine how much more thankful for our food we might be, were we forced to prepare more simple meals that had to be cooked outdoors; imagine how much more we might need to look out for each others' needs and safety; imagine no TV; imagine how much more thankful we might be for what we often take for granted the other 51 weeks of the year

I really don't expect any of you to scrap your plans for Thanksgiving day and all its traditional trappings; I'm not going to; but I would hope that we all will be more aware of what we have to be thankful for and how we go about giving thanks to God at this time of year; maybe we can all let some of this Biblical vision of Thanksgiving help us to be more thankful in our hearts on Thursday; maybe we can all let this thankfulness continue in the days and weeks to follow, as we remind ourselves not to get too comfortable, and as we remind ourselves how completely dependent upon God we really are, for even every breath that we take; and, maybe we can think of some new ways to tweak our Thanksgiving traditions and try out something different this year or plan to do some things different next year

and one last thing; our service today, this worship called Holy Eucharist; remember that 'Eucharist' is the Greek work for ..., you guessed it, 'thanksgiving;' after celebrating this Holy Eucharist, this holy thanksgiving meal here at church, I pray that your Thanksgiving meal at home on Thursday will be equally holy, and as spiritually fulfilling; I invite you to do whatever

you need to do to make sure your meal and your time on that day is holy and is spiritually fulfilling

[Before Holy Communion I asked people to pay attention to how many times the words ‘thanks’ and ‘thanksgiving’ are used in the Eucharistic Prayer, and in all versions of our Eucharistic Prayers, as we celebrate “The Great Thanksgiving” portion of our worship. See in *The Book of Common Prayer*, pages 333 and 361.]