

“Thanksgiving and the Canaanites”

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Deut. 26:1-11; Luke 17:11-19

If things are feeling a little off kilter for you this morning, that’s understandable, given the theme of Thanksgiving that’s anchoring today’s worship and the juxtaposition of Canaanites with Thanksgiving in my sermon title.

The reason Thanksgiving has come a week early this year to Forest Hill Church is so that we can observe the Celebration of the Reign of Christ next Sunday, which is the close of the church year. I’ll say more about that next week and about why next Sunday is more important than most Protestant Christians recognize, if they recognize it at all.

And since the Canaanites aren’t recognized much better by most of us than the Celebration of the Reign of Christ is, I’d like to start our thinking together this morning with the original occupants of the land of Canaan.

I’ve always had a slightly uneasy conscience when I hear the words from Deuteronomy that Carolyn read for us a few minutes ago:

“When you have come into the land that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it and settle in it,”

and then the text goes on with instructions about offering the first fruits of the land.

The disturber of my conscience is that innocuous-sounding temporal clause casually referring to the dispossession of the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the land that the Israelites were promised. Our religious tradition, beginning with our foundational document in the First Testament, says that the Canaanites were dispossessed of their homeland because they deserved it, because of the “detestable things” and “abominations” related to their worship of gods other than Yahweh, things like child sacrifice.

The problem is, we only have the Israelite side of that story. We don’t have a single text from the Canaanites themselves prescribing child sacrifice or recounting a single occurrence of it. We do, however, have several references in the Bible to **Israelite** kings sacrificing **their** children, which would suggest that in these texts the Israelites were projecting their own worst behavior onto the people whose land they were taking by

force. Sound familiar? Sound like anything we descendants of European colonizers might know something about?

Thanksgiving provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be an American Christian. In churches like this one, those reflections may have become fraught, since many of us are no longer content to rest cozily in the mythic past of Pilgrims and Indians sitting down together to celebrate their happy co-existence over platters of yummy food. Such a sit-down dinner apparently did happen in the autumn of 1621, but it was far more a strategic and alliance-building affair than a celebration of multi-culturalism. It was not repeated, and the annual national day of Thanksgiving that you and I know didn't emerge until 1863, when President Lincoln issued a proclamation making the last Thursday in November a day of thanksgiving, including prayers asking God to heal a badly divided nation in the midst of a bloody Civil War.

We hear much today of how badly divided we are, and while that's certainly true, it's also certainly not the whole truth, for at least two reasons.

First, when have we not been divided? and, second, despite our divisions, the fact of the matter is that children are still going to school, people are still going to work, and neighbors are still, for the most part, treating each other kindly.

Food is more expensive, to be sure, but the shelves are still mostly full. Rates of measles are going up, to be sure, but our health care system remains mostly intact. The wealth gap is increasing and graft is the new normal, to be sure, but scrutiny, protest, and exposure haven't been completely suppressed – at least not yet.

When the majority of us gather a week from Thursday, I hope that our celebrations will take such quotidian blessings into account without ignoring the harsh realities with which many in this country still continue to live. While we need to be honest about who we are, we need not make our sins the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving table. There are many opportunities for us to teach, to reflect on, and to consider ways to repair the genocide of Native American peoples and the despoiling of the natural resources of this continent in the wake of European colonization, and we should take advantage of those opportunities. We know that our history, as a nation, is deeply flawed, and we know that our brokenness is in our DNA.

And yet, even as we know this about ourselves and acknowledge it, we are under a moral obligation, it seems to me, not to allow this crucial self-knowledge to drain us of joy or enervate our ability to give thanks for what is genuinely good and beautiful and lovely in our lives. For those realities are no less real and no less important than our

failures of love and courage. As the Westminster catechism reminds us, our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever, and **forever includes now** – we are meant to enjoy God now, in this world, despite its suffering and pain.

We descendants of the Reformed Christian tradition have a spotty reputation when it comes to enjoying God in this life; we can sometimes come across as being deathly afraid that someone, somewhere is enjoying herself.

But that's not the way it's always been or has to be. There's no virtue in being the community Eeyore. Even so formidable a Puritan as Jonathan Edwards had a lovingly aesthetic relationship with God in nature, saying this about roses: ***"Roses grow upon briers, which is to signify that all temporal sweets are mixed with bitter. . . . The rose, the chief of all flowers, is the last thing that comes out. The briery prickly bush grows before, but the end and crown of all is the beautiful and fragrant rose."***

The end and crown of life, we believe, is not sin, death, sorrow, destruction, or punishment. We believe that living lovingly wins in the end, which is the central truth of the resurrection, which is the central truth of our religion. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" the angels asked the women at Jesus' tomb on Easter morning. "He is not here, but has risen."

The first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, according to all four gospels, were women, outsiders to the public patriarchal power structures of their day. The one person healed of a skin disease who returned to thank Jesus in our second lesson was an outsider, a Samaritan, a foreigner. We need the perspective of those not at the center of the action to appreciate what God is doing in our midst – continuing to shower us with blessings not because of us but often in spite of us.

This past Thursday morning, Diana Woodbridge and I were part of a Greater Cleveland Congregations discussion of the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. That historic document, considered the fountainhead of modern Catholic social teaching, explicitly prioritizes the welfare and interests of workers over the profits of employers – people before profits, in other words – and while virtue is the common inheritance of rich and poor alike, the pope wrote, "God seems to lean rather towards those who suffer" (p. 21), an idea that will be developed in subsequent decades into an awareness of the Bible's "preferential option for the poor."

Rerum Novarum was a radical departure from the social, political, and economic quietism that had characterized papal pronouncements up to its time. But "new

occasions teach new duties,” and Pope Leo XIII felt it his duty, as principal teacher of the world’s Roman Catholic people, to address those “new things” of the Second Industrial Revolution that the Latin of his title referred to.

A few weeks ago, as our plane descended over Cleveland and the ground of northeast Ohio came into view after a very long day of travel, some of us pilgrims strained to catch a glimpse of the beautiful place we are privileged to call home. And one of the things that struck me, as we flew over Lake County and then Cuyahoga County, was how beautiful the autumn tree canopy was. Despite the occasional patch of asphalt barrenness, most of the land around here, including residential areas, is forested, and I could hear Louis Armstrong singing “What a Wonderful World.”

Do you think Louis Armstrong, who grew up in a racially segregated country, believed those words that he made so famous with his singing voice? He did, actually.

The song was composed in 1967, when a record producer named Bob Thiele said to Armstrong that our violent and badly divided country – divided by the Vietnam War, divided by racial segregation, divided by political assassinations – that divided country needed a song of hope and recovery, and Armstrong agreed. And when he saw the lyrics for the first time, Louis Armstrong immediately experienced an emotional connection with them, saying that those lyrics depicted exactly the world he knew growing up in the Corona neighborhood of Queens, New York. Armstrong brought that emotional connection to his singing, and few songs have had the power to heal divisions and overcome barriers the way Louis Armstrong did with “What a Wonderful World.”

It’s easy, in our present historical moment, to lose sight of the fundamental goodness of God’s creation, captured so beautifully in that popular song. And while none of us should ignore what’s being done to the vulnerable by the powerful in our name, we should not let those realities plunge us into such deep crevasses of despair that we find ourselves incapable of seeing anything to be thankful for.

In this country, in this moment, to be realistically and honestly thankful – seeing the Canaanites as well as the Israelites, the First Americans as well as the Pilgrims, the blessings of our homes as well as the fear of our neighbors and friends – to be thankful nonetheless is an act of defiance. To celebrate what is good in our character and our history, while never denying our collective acts of savagery and cruelty, is to find common ground with those less mindful of our nation’s margins. And when we find common ground with those who differ from us – who may alarm us, baffle us, or even enrage us – we are fulfilling the command of Jesus, who told us to love everyone,

including our enemies. In the ministry of reconciliation, friends, we all have work to do. Let us be thankful, then, to be thus employed.