

“DEEPER AND WIDER IN THANKSGIVING”

Rev. Victor Kim

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

(10-13-19) Thanksgiving

What are your best memories of Thanksgiving?

Maybe it's around a table with family, with great food, with turkey, ham, with all the fixings? Maybe Thanksgiving is a time when your family gets together, traveling from other parts of the city or province or even country to be together. Speaking of traveling at Thanksgiving, remember that movie from the 80's, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*?

It tells the story of two guys, one, a marketing executive named Neil Page played by Steve Martin and the other, a shower curtain ring salesman named Del Griffith unforgettably depicted by John Candy. Neil and Del are forced share a three-day odyssey of misadventures as Neil tries to get home to Chicago from New York in time for Thanksgiving. It's a classic movie, a comedy, a farce, but in the end it's a movie about two people and their need to get home. For Neil it's about getting home to his family but for Del, it's about his need for any family, for a sense of belonging.

I remember another journey at Thanksgiving, this time in Korea with Sophie's family. We were recently married; maybe a year or two, and we happened to visit Korea during the traditional harvest festival season, the equivalent of our Thanksgiving. Koreans travel en masse during what's called Chuseok, usually trying to return to their hometowns in the countryside, especially where the oldest living relative lives. It's a time to give thanks, but also to honour ancestors by visiting their graves.

The highways are so crowded during this season that people actually get out of their cars and cook on the side of the road because traffic often comes to a complete standstill. My father-in-law told us that we would be leaving first thing in the morning, maybe around 4 am, so that we could avoid the traffic exiting the city for the countryside. Of course, we didn't end up leaving until around 10 am, the absolute worst time to leave the city during Chuseok.

Predictably, we spent hours in traffic just trying to get out of Seoul. There are over 23.5 million cars in South Korea compared to 3.7 million cars registered in the entire province of B.C. South Korea is ten times smaller than B.C. in size. Now imagine millions of cars on the highways at the same time, in a country only a tenth the size of B.C. all trying to get to their destination on the same weekend. I just remember 5 adults being squeezed into a Hyundai Excel sub compact, with my father-in-law, who had just gotten his driver's license, the equivalent of an N driver, navigating the most crowded highways you can imagine. He told me I could sit in the front passenger seat so that I didn't have to squeeze three across in the back seat, but I really think it was so that I could get a first-hand look at how close we would come to death on more than a few occasions. I was never more thankful than when we finally arrived at our destination safely and I could get out of that car at last.

Thanksgiving in Canada is traditionally connected with harvest festivals that took place in Europe to give thanks for the bounty of harvest. In 1957, Thanksgiving as we now celebrate is was formalized with Vincent Massey, the Governor General of Canada, issuing a proclamation stating,

“A Day of General Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed – to be observed on the second Monday in October.”

For Christians, while Thanksgiving has long been connected to giving thanks to God for the blessings we have come to know, there is no single biblical text that would be the basis for what we call Thanksgiving today. It's not like Christmas or Easter, where a specific event in the Bible has led to a day or season of celebration of that event. But the idea of thanksgiving is, of course, found throughout the entire Bible.

However, there's a difference between the thanksgiving that the Bible would have us observe and the holiday that has evolved to be celebrated through much of the world. The theological concept of thanksgiving is rooted in giving thanks, not because of the bounty of harvest or whatever other bounty we may have come to know in our lives, whether it's the blessing of families, of material wealth, of healthy relationships, of national security or any other of a myriad of blessings, but rather our thanksgiving **is to be rooted in the provision of God's grace, which is known in its fullness in the loving gift of God's son, Jesus Christ, and the gift of salvation which Jesus has made possible in the cross and by his resurrection from the dead. Christian thanksgiving is an act of remembering what God has done for us in God's grace, mercy and love.**

It begins early in the witness of scripture. In our reading this morning from the book of Deuteronomy, we find the people of Israel, having journeyed for 40 years through the desert after leaving Egypt, on the cusp of the Promised Land. Moses, their leader and God's prophet, has been told by God that he would not be able to enter the land and now he gives the people final instructions before they move into the

land that God had promised them. Once the people had settled the land God was giving them, they were to take some of the first fruits of the ground which they had harvested and bring it to the priest who would offer it before God at the altar of the Lord. Then the people were to recite a liturgy of God's saving acts.

Starting with the journey of Jacob into Egypt, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous," it recounts how the Egyptians later mistreated Jacob's descendants, treating them harshly and afflicting them by imposing hard labor on them. The liturgy then recalls that as the people cried out to the Lord, God heard their voice and saw their affliction, toil and oppression and brought the people of Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... to this place and gave them this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Finally, the people would conclude by saying, "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."

While our Thanksgiving holiday is often tied to the idea of harvest and giving thanks for the bounty we know, **the text tells us clearly that our thanksgiving isn't for the harvest**, that the offering of our first fruits before God isn't because the crops were good this year, or about whatever else might have been good about our bounty, like our stocks did well or our kids got good jobs, **but rather that the first fruits are a token of our gratitude for what God has done for God's people, for us.**

For the people of Israel, it was about their deliverance from bondage in Egypt and the provision of land. **For Christians, that deliverance is from the bondage of sin and death and the provision of God's salvation through God's most precious gift, the life, death and resurrection of God's son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.**

For this, we are to be thankful, not only today or tomorrow, but always and forever.

Going deeper in thanksgiving is to move beyond understanding thanksgiving as related primarily to the bounty of our lives, whether that bounty is connected to the harvest, to health, to wealth or any other measure of temporary blessing in life.

Yes, it's important and vital to recognize and give thanks for those material blessings in our lives but thanksgiving on a deeper level is about being able to give thanks

even if our harvest isn't what we had hoped for,

even if our health isn't what we have prayed for,

even if our relationships aren't what we'd wished for.

Going deeper in thanksgiving is about recognizing that God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is God's lasting and eternal provision for us, not only a temporary gift that cannot last.

And so, in response, we bring our first fruits, the best part of **what we have**, but more than that, the best part of **who we are**, not only our stuff, but our stories, our hearts, our praise, our worship, our commitment to God in an act of thanksgiving and gratitude. But that's not all.

In scripture salvation is never an individual thing. It's always about a people, the people of God, all the people that God loves. **Going deeper in thanksgiving will necessarily lead to a going wider as well.** Deep with God, Wide with the World.

That's our motto and that's the theme of thanksgiving as well. It's not enough for the people of Israel to bring their first fruits from the land of promise to the Lord.

After they have brought their gift and bowed before the Lord, then they, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among them, are to celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord has given them.

The depth of our thanksgiving must also be lived out in the width of our sharing. The people aren't just to go back home to their families, they are to celebrate with the Levites and the aliens who reside in their midst. The Levites are named because they are the priests and they don't own land, but the aliens are also named, those who are not part of the people of Israel, those who don't belong to the community, those who the people of Israel might have expected to be outside the provision of God. **Clearly, they are not.**

The liturgy recalls that Jacob and his family lived in Egypt as aliens, foreigners, immigrants, as those who didn't belong to the community. The people of God are to include those on the outside because God's people know what it is to be on the outside.

What's clear from the text is that recital and offering are not enough! Thanksgiving isn't complete if all we do is to acknowledge where our blessings come from. It's not complete if all we do is to return to God our first fruits. The wideness of thanksgiving comes as the inevitable social requirement is added to the recital of memory and the offering of the worshipping gift.

Proper memory and its recital and proper worship based on the memory are never enough in Israel.¹

Everyone, those who have and those who have not, those who are God's people and those who are aliens, those who are sojourners, those who are immigrants, those

¹ John C. Holbert, *A Sacred Thanksgiving*, *Patheos*, November 16, 2010

who are refugees, those who are poor, all are to celebrate and participate in the feast along with those whose table groans under the weight of the fruits of the blessing. Going wider in thanksgiving means that none should be excluded.

Immediately after our reading from Deuteronomy there is further instruction from Moses to the people that every third year, ten percent of all the produce that is harvested from the land will be left to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within the towns of the people of Israel.

Thanksgiving for what God has provided, whether it be a bountiful harvest or eternal salvation, is always meant to be shared, to be celebrated widely.

And here's the thing for us as Christians to remember. The reason that the command to go wider comes at the end of the reading this morning is because our going wider in thanksgiving is always rooted in our going deeper first. **For us to be able to sustain the breadth of our wideness in thanksgiving, we need first to be rooted in proper memory and in the worship based on that memory.** Unless our thanksgiving runs deep, those of us who are insiders to the gift and to the worship, will not be able to sustain a thanksgiving that is broad in its inclusivity.²

We go deep so that we can also go wide.

As the movie, Planes, Trains and Automobiles ends, Neil finally makes it to Chicago and is more than ready to ditch Del and get home to his family. As he's on the train home, something that Del said earlier strikes Neil and he comes to understand that Del has no home to go to, no family waiting for him. He comes back to the train station and finds Del there, with nowhere to go and no one to go to. He invites Del to go home with him. Deeper and wider in thanksgiving.

² ibid

This Thanksgiving we have brought backpacks of blessing to be shared with those who live among us without the resources we have been blessed with. But this is only a small token of what it means to live as a people of thanksgiving, what it means to go deeper and wider in thanksgiving. A more fundamental question might be, **“Who sits around our tables at Thanksgiving?”** Maybe we don’t have to go and invite strangers to our Thanksgiving dinner, although I know people who do, but the bigger question is, as people who are thankful to God for the gift of God’s salvation in our lives, **how do we extend that grace to others?**

How do we make sure that God’s blessing in our lives, isn’t only kept for ourselves or for those close to us? What choices can we make to include those who are often excluded in the bounty of life?

And this isn’t about our generosity, it’s God’s command to God’s people.

The remembering of God’s provision as our act of thanksgiving reminds us that we too were once oppressed, marginalized, on the outside looking in because of our brokenness and sin. God in Jesus Christ has saved us, brought us inside, made us whole, healed us. This Thanksgiving, as we go deeper and wider in thanksgiving, may the grace of God’s provision in our lives be celebrated, may we give thanks for what we know and have received, most amazingly in Jesus Christ, and may we live as a people through whom that gift may continue to be shared **with all the people whom God so loves.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!

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