

I Do Not Cease to Give Thanks

Ephesians 1:15–23

Center Church, Hartford

November 22, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

It's Thanksgiving this week, a different Thanksgiving, for sure, but Thanksgiving nonetheless. 400 years ago this month, the Pilgrims and others on the Mayflower landed on the shores of Massachusetts. That first winter, almost half of those who were on that boat did not survive. The next year proved challenging in almost every way. More died. Some returned to England. About a year after they arrived, the event we have fictionalized as the first Thanksgiving took place. There is no question that more of those settlers would have died had not the Wampanoag people in the area helped them.

But memories are short, and we often change history to fit what we want to believe. It wasn't long before English and Dutch settlers in what is now New England took land that didn't belong to them, went to war with those who did own the land and slaughtered them, and eventually tried to erase their presence from the land altogether, except as quaint participants in a dinner party. The promise of that first Thanksgiving, about which we tell our children warm stories of cooperation between different kinds of people, has not been realized on a broad scale in New England or anywhere in this country.

Yet.

Why do we keep telling this story? We could just forget it and have this holiday be what it was originally meant to be, a national day of Thanksgiving, proclaimed by George Washington in 1789. Here's what he said:

“Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor-- and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness. Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next (please note that this year it is again Nov. 26) to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be-- That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks--for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation--for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence

which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war-- for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed--for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted--for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us. And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions-- to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually--to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed--to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord--To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us--and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best."

No mention of the native peoples, or enslaved Africans for that matter. To give him credit, Washington does admit that wrong things may have been done and asks for pardon. Then he paints a very rosy picture of the establishment of government and prosperity for all which may be just a bit exaggerated.

All of this to say that sometimes we give thanks for things that have not yet come to pass. That's why we tell the Pilgrims and Wampanoag dinner story. We remember the story of native peoples and foreigners peacefully co-existing in Plymouth for a brief moment in time because we hope it could be so always. We remember Washington calling for thanksgiving for some things that had happened, and many that had not for most of the people living here in 1789. Sometimes we give thanks for the now, but not yet, the past that was and may not have been but we wish it had. We give thanks as a function of a hope that someday we will get it fully right. And that is not a bad thing.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians that he was thankful for them, he wrote praying that they would yet come to have a spirit of wisdom, that their hearts might be enlightened and that they would fully understand the hope to which God was calling them, and, as Paul says, "the immeasurable greatness of God's power." Paul is giving thanks for a church that has not yet lived into its mission, but Paul firmly believes they will. He gives thanks for the now, but not yet. And by so doing, empowers the Ephesians to step out in faith to do all they can

by trusting in God's power and love, a power and love greater than they have yet imagined.

As we come to another Thanksgiving as a nation, I give thanks for much of what has been, and, like Pres. Washington, ask pardon from God for all that has not been what should be in our country, our church, or our lives. As we come to another Thanksgiving as a church, and on the day you set your budget, which is part of defining your mission for next year and years to come, I give thanks for you, for, as Paul says, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord and your love toward all." Indeed, I have experienced some of that.

And yet. You are not there yet. You never have been, even in the imagined past glory days. None of us have. For God's imagination is bigger than ours and God calls us forward in ways we are only just beginning to discern. And we give thanks for the wideness of God's vision, and even more, God's mercy.

With Paul, then, let us not cease to give thanks. And as we do so, let us pray for wisdom, revelation, enlightenment, hope and a greater understanding of and openness to the immeasurable power and possibility at work when we believe. Let us say, with Dag Hammarskjold, "For all that has been, Thanks! To all that will be, Yes!" Amen.