

When I lived in the South: people said Thanksgiving differently

Me: ThanksGIVing; many Southerners: THANKSgiving

I wonder if there's any difference in emphasis? Emphasizing the thanks part versus emphasizing the giving part?

Regardless, I find myself thinking this Thanksgiving, or THANKSgiving, about how thanksgiving is a verb, not just a noun. Thanksgiving is not just thankfulness. Thankfulness is an attitude, and a good one of course. But Thanksgiving is when an attitude of thankfulness gets expressed in words and deeds. Whether we're thanking a friend for an act of kindness, a loved one for caring for us, or God our creator for the gift of this whole creation and of our own lives, thanks don't exist until we express them. Which is why we teach children to say thank you out loud, and why there's still something about getting a handwritten thank-you note that matters.

And it's why giving thanks is in fact the central ritual act of Christians. We have literally enshrined the act of giving thanks to God as the thing we do on every Sunday and feast day. The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving in Greek, and the central prayer of the Eucharist is called the Great Thanksgiving in our Prayer Book.

It's been said that gratitude is the best remedy for anxiety. Today we hear Jesus' words about not being anxious. Of course there is a lot to be anxious about, in our world today as there was in Jesus' time. But he counsels us to remember that just as God cares for all of creation, so God cares for us.

In his words about how God clothes the lilies and cares for the birds, and so God watches over us as well, I hear a reminder of the Garden of Eden, that story at the beginning of the story of scripture where humans are embedded harmoniously and without rupture in a natural world that meets their needs and of which they are an integral part. That dream of human beings at one with the rest of the natural world is one we long to recapture and that so often seems elusive or even forever lost. But the remedy begins with gratitude. When we practice Eucharist, when we practice true thanksgiving, we see the creation as God intended it to be, and we also commit ourselves to work toward that creation.

Today we celebrate Thanksgiving Day, a harvest festival, a day of thanks for the way God's beautiful creation nourishes us. It's a day to point to the hope that humans were made for, to be a blessing to the earth and all its other species, not exploiters but caregivers in a dance of mutual benefit and mutual blessing. We have to be clear-eyed about all the ways that has not happened. That is part of the reality the church names as sin. But we also believe in a God who looks beyond our sin, who forgives it and heals it, and gives us strength and grace for newness of life. So today we give thanks for this earth in all its beauty and fertility, for the ways it mothers us and feeds us, and we pray for the grace to care for it in return.

I want to offer a prayer by Diana Butler Bass, called “A Grounded Thanksgiving Prayer.” (2016)

*God, there are days we do not feel grateful. When we are anxious or angry. When we feel alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world, or with our neighbors.*

*God, we struggle to feel grateful.*

*But this Thanksgiving, we choose gratitude. We choose to accept life as a gift from you, from the unfolding work of all creation. We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.*

*We make the choice to see our ancestors, those who came before us, and their stories, as a continuing gift of wisdom for us today. We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating them for who they are, and be thankful for our homes whether humble or grand. We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted or how much we feel hurt by them. We choose to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the public stage of the future of humankind and creation.*

*God, this Thanksgiving, we do not give thanks. We choose it.*

*And we will make thanks, with strong hands and courageous hearts. When we see your sacred generosity, we become aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we all are guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received. We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we choose to see grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere, as the tender web of all creation. In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude onto the world.*

*Thus, with you, and with all those gathered here, we pledge to make thanks. And we ask you to strengthen us in this resolve. Here, now, and into the future. Around this table. Around the table of our nation. Around the table of the earth.*

*Amen.*