

SERMON: 2018/11/18 (Community Thanksgiving Service, 1st UMC, McMinnville) - Psalm 104:1-7, 10-15, 18-24a & Matthew 7:7-11_BTR

'[Jesus said, a]sk, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.' [Pause.]

As an Englishman, the peculiar American celebration of "Thanksgiving" was always something of a conundrum; a mystery - *an enigma* - to me. And this was because my frame of reference - my "window" into it - was so small: what I knew of it - before I married my Tennessean wife, Rebekah, that is - was entirely and completely limited and determined by Hollywood's exports - by movies and "T. V." And, according to those, it seemed - inexplicably - like a *second*, pre-emptive Christmas; a "dry-run" for the big day itself.

Consider it, if you will, from my point of view - as it might be pictured in a magazine: There, on the table in the dining-room, sat a roast turkey, which is the now traditional centerpiece of the *yuletide* British lunch. And around it sit an extended family, relatives from faraway, wearing novelty jumpers *and arguing*. And then, outside, according to the Hallmark Channel at least, it snows - perpetually. Like in New York!

And this seemed so...strange!
And greedy.
- Two Christmasses?
Two!?!
Well, that's just not cricket.
I felt like saying, "Come on guys, pick one."

Furthermore, deep down, I was always suspicious that there might be also some anti-English subtext to it: Like you were thumbing your noses at us (- though with more subtlety than on July 4th -): The Puritan "fathers" had, after all, as ardent (small "r") republicans,^[n.1] intentionally abandoned the cold, grey shores I call "home," and her (hereditary) sovereign; and, I'll be honest, it's hard to not be a sore-loser about that:

like seeing your "Ex" with her new boyfriend walking down Main Street, laughing and holding hands.

Yeah, on Facebook you tell everyone that the break-up was "mutual," and she really wasn't a very good kisser anyway; but no one buys it: she "traded up," and that's hard to "swallow."

Which is why the fact that those brave, *Christian* settlers almost *all* died makes me smile.[n.2]

I shouldn't say that as a priest, of course, but "Hey!" Schadenfreude, right?

- Who doesn't enjoy, just a tiny bit, the self-inflicted suffering of others?

And yet their colony survived.

Indeed, more than that, it *thrived*:

Those emaciated, hollow-cheeked '[w]idows and orphans' who gathered around those heavy-laden trestles in the Autumn of 1621,[n.3] for 'a one-off expression of gratitude',[n.4] went on to form part of the backbone of, perhaps, *the* most successful nation in the world.

And how?!

What had made the crucial difference?

What had tipped the scales?

Let me remind you:

An act of love.

An act of love - of extraordinary, undeserved generosity - by a stranger.

And I say 'by a stranger' because he was exactly that:

Massasoit Sachem, the man - the "Indian" - who saved the starving "pilgrims" by bringing them a seasonal bounty of local produce, was different from them in nearly *every way imaginable*:

They were poor proletarian people from the crowded cities of Europe - cobblers, candle-makers, 'workers at the lowest level in the production and retail sale of textiles'.[n.5]

Their religious convictions had forced them to the very outside - *literally!* - of their original community.

He, on the other hand, was a powerful tribal chief, at the very heart of regional affairs in the North-East; well-respected and even feared.

They wore itchy, heavy, flea-filled woolen clothes that concealed every square inch of themselves apart from the necessary extremities - the face and hands; whilst he went '[n]early naked', only some red war-paint on his face and some feathers in his hair.[n.6]

Their society was rapidly industrializing and urbanizing, and they carried many evidences of this with them - their firearms, for example.

His culture, *deeply* rooted in the rhythms and resources of the natural world, was essentially unchanged since the last Ice Age.

... One could go on and on.

But I want to impress upon you a simple, single point: that, in a number of interesting respects, the so-called *first* "Thanksgiving" is a metaphor - a parallel - for - *of* - the Gospel, the "Good News" - the unique message of the Church, irrespective of your denomination...

which is that of another, otherworldly stranger - also a *powerful* ruler to be feared, "captain" of the angels - "Jesus," coming with a much-needed, transformative gift to a foreign, unhappy place - our hearts, *this* earth.

He was also a man, one - like Massasoit - fundamentally different to those He came to serve and save.

He needed to be fundamentally different because what he brought - a new start and a new kind of relationship with God - depended on a sinless sacrifice; [2 Cor. 5:21] on perfect obedience to a holy Law. [Rom. 5:19; Heb. 2:10, 5:8-9, 7:28]

And His gift is "life."

But not just another year or two of it - ultimately all the cranberries and sweet-potatoes and pumpkin-pies can do is sustain our bodies for eight or nine decades or so - and that's if you are lucky.

No, the gift that Jesus brings is *beyond* measure, quite literally - it is 'eternal': [Jn. 3:15].

Which is why we can never say "thank you" enough, and there's always reason to extend and enlarge our efforts.

Let's *recommit* ourselves, then, to being a *thankful* people, as we gather around this - the Lord's - table (to my right).

Amen?

Footnotes:

1. See: Winship, Michael P. (2012), *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill*, Cambridge, M. A.: Harvard University Press.
2. See: Bailyn, Bernard (2013), *The Barbarous Years - The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*, New York, N. Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 336-338.
3. McKenzie, Robert Tracy (2013), *The First Thanksgiving: What the Real Story Tells Us About Loving God and Learning From History*, Downers Grove, I. L.: IVP Academic, 132.
4. Milbrandt, Jay (2017), *They Came For Freedom: The Forgotten, Epic*

Adventure of the Pilgrims, Nashville, T. N.: Nelson Books, 221.

5. Bailyn (2013), 325.

6. Milbrandt (2017), 150.