

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Thanksgiving Sunday

“How to Pray on Thanksgiving”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Years ago, I decided to forego the usual Thanksgiving dinner and festivities and I drove to the coast of Massachusetts, to Plymouth, to participate in the annual ceremony held every year on Thanksgiving Day, right there at Plymouth Rock. The ceremony is led by the Wampanoag Indians and it is called “Thanks/Grieving.”

I had heard that the ceremony was very moving but that it was really for Indian people—that white people could be present but only to stand in silence and witness. I decided that witnessing to the pain of the Indian people on Thanksgiving Day was a good thing for me to do and so I went.

When I arrived I found that two circles were being formed. One was a close tight knot of people, all Indian, in the inner circle. The outer circle, where the white people stood, was out a ways surrounding the inner circle but at a respectful distance. Throughout the ceremony, it was difficult to hear what was being said in the inner circle. But that seemed right. The white people were there to witness, it was not our event, we were not really meant to hear what was happening with the Native people. We were there to stand in silence—not speak, not interact, not draw attention to ourselves or away from the circle of Indian people. We were simply there to witness.

The Native people, mainly from the Wampanoag nation, held hands; there was much crying and wailing. Sometimes a loud word or two pierced the cold November air. But most of the words shared in the inner circle were not audible to those of us in the outer circle. There was some chanting. But mainly the Indian people held one another and cried.

After a time, the Native people broke from their inner circle and went down to the water. The white people were asked not to come.

I could not see much, but I could tell that the Indian people threw some things on the water, maybe feathers, maybe food. Several went to the water's edge and went down on one knee. It seemed there were more tears, certainly there was more holding one another.

Then the Indian people came back to re-form their inner circle and they ended the ceremony. They left as a group together. The white people in the outer circle were asked to remain until all the Indian people had left and then we were to leave in silence.

Thanksgiving is a painful day for many Native Americans. While many white people gather with family and friends and say prayers of gratitude and feast on turkey, squash, potatoes, cranberry sauce and pie, many Native people reflect, fast, and weep.

In an article published in **The Progressive** magazine in 2009, Mary Annette Pember, Red Cliff Ojibwe, writes this in her essay titled *As a Native-American, I have mixed feelings about Thanksgiving*: “This Thanksgiving, as an Ojibwe woman, I will grieve for what Europeans did to Native people here... I will grieve because Europeans killed most of us quickly and directly at first and later resorted to more cunning means of forced assimilation, such as boarding schools and discriminatory land allotment. I will grieve because it is estimated that there were between 7 million and 10 million indigenous individual inhabiting what is now America at the beginning of European contact in the early 15th century. But by 1900, there were only about 230,000 of us left.”

Most schoolchildren in the United States learn that the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony invited the local Indians to a big harvest feast after surviving their first bitter year in New England. What the children do not hear as much is that it was the Indian people who taught the Europeans to plant corn and catch fish that made it possible for the Europeans to survive that first year.

What American schoolchildren also do not hear is that the Pilgrims held meetings within their own community to discuss who legally owned the land they now inhabited—was it theirs because they had arrived and made it their home in the “new world”? Or did it belong to the Native people they found living there when they arrived, the Native people who had been there for centuries before the white people arrived. The settlers decided it was their land.

What most schoolchildren also do not hear is that illnesses including the smallpox virus that the Europeans brought with them infected and killed countless Native people. Schoolchildren in this country may hear about John Winthrop, the founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and his bravery that first winter and how he kept those frail European settlers alive. But our sons and daughters in the 4th, 5th and 6th grades probably do not hear that as the Native people died from European-borne illnesses, John Winthrop thought their deaths were an act of God, a divine miracle. Schoolchildren are probably not told that the famous John Winthrop wrote this to a friend in England, "But for the native in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by smallpox which continues among them. So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place, those who remain in these parts, being in all not 50, have put themselves under our protection."

The early settlers who came to this country, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, were people of faith. The men and women who participated in the long, slow slaughter of the Indians, were people of faith.

On the first Thanksgiving it is said that they bowed their heads in grateful prayers to God for the bounty of the earth and for having survived the first cold New England winter. Maybe they should have bowed their heads and thanked God for the Indian people who taught them how to survive a cold New England winter and who tried to befriend them. Maybe they should have kept prayers of thanksgiving for the Indian people on their lips for the next many years and decades and centuries. Maybe we need to say those prayers today.

The Pilgrims and the Puritans were people of faith. And so we wonder how they could have taken part in the slaughter of their fellow human beings. They arrived on the shores of an already inhabited land and claimed it as their own. The Pilgrims were good God-fearing people and that may have been part of the problem. The colonists believed God protected them and championed the invasion of Native land that they led. Because the Pilgrims considered themselves good Christians and worshiped God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they looked down on the "savages," as they called the Indian people, who did not worship a Trinitarian deity. That may have given the Europeans license to see the Indian people as "other" and even expendable.

The Pilgrims were God-fearing people and they knew their Bible well and that might also have been part of the problem.

They knew that according to the Old Testament, God gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites. . . . Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River to settle in the Promised Land. The problem was that the Promised Land was already inhabited—by the Canaanites, and the Amorites and the Jebusites and whole tribes of people. Could those Bible stories have influenced the Pilgrims? Did those stories in effect give the Pilgrims license to conquer both the land and the people in the new world?

Maybe those God-fearing Pilgrims could quote, word for word, the verse from Deuteronomy that is our reading for today. . . . *When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, ‘Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.’* Deuteronomy 26:1-3

Friends, we are the Haydenville **Congregational** Church. The Pilgrims and the Puritan are our religious ancestors. They formed the Congregational Church and we are Congregationalists. Our church springs from their faith. We are grateful for their courage, their strong beliefs and their determination to build a new life in a new land.

But those of us who are white must confront our past and recognize that our foremothers and forefathers in our faith used the Bible to justify the stealing of land and the slaughter of Native people. This is in our past. And this history is especially poignant and relevant on Thanksgiving.

If we allow ourselves to gather with loved ones, prepare a big meal, and bow our heads in prayers of gratitude for the many blessings of our good lives, and we don't also say “forgive us,” we are complicit with a past that is filled with tragedy and injustice.

Thanksgiving is a good day to ask for forgiveness for the ways our ancestors participated in the loss of life of the Native people who lived on this land for centuries before the Europeans arrived.

Thanksgiving is a good day to be repentant and say “O God, we ask you to forgive the sins of our foremothers and forefathers who felt entitled to steal land and take lives to establish themselves on what was for them foreign soil.”

Thanksgiving is a good day to thank God for the courage and bravery of the Native people and to bless their souls and spirits. It is a good day to lift up their sorrow and suffering which continue today. Thanksgiving is a good day to remember that it is a day known as “Thanks/Grieving” in many Indian communities and to grieve as well. Thanksgiving is a good day to thank God for the wisdom, power, strength and endurance of Native Americans.

I am giving you guidelines, tips, pointers and suggestions but even I do not know how to pray on Thanksgiving. I did not know what to say in my silent prayers when I stood and watched the Wampanoag and other Indian people wail and moan as they huddled together next to Plymouth Rock. I remember having a broken heart and being at a loss for words. I could not think of how or what to pray.

And even now I know that my prayers on Thanksgiving are mumbled and confused. I am grateful for the abundance in my life, in so many ways, on so many levels. And I want to thank God on Thanksgiving for the bounty that I experience every day.

But I also want to acknowledge deep within my heart that as a white person I have much to grieve on Thanksgiving and I must ask for God’s forgiveness.

I must also pledge to never speak about God, preach about God, refer to God, or teach about God in any way that allows Christianity to justify exclusion, exploitation, oppression or violence of any kind. Thanksgiving is a good day for me to say: God, I know you are a God of love and compassion and beyond even those, a God of justice and peace. May I NEVER let my words, my leadership, my faith, my worship, my actions portray you as a God who condones greed, or suffering, or abuse, or domination or conquest.

Thanksgiving is a good day for us to pause amidst the revelry and get down on one knee, as I saw the Native people do by the water as they wept, and to recommit our lives to be channels of God’s love and justice, to be sources of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God on earth, AND to tell the story of our past as a nation as fully and truthfully as we can. Thanksgiving is a good day to embrace the truth about this nation and to name it. And when we speak of the slaughter of the Native people to say “never again.” Thanksgiving is a good day to say: As people of faith, we pledge that there will be no killing, no exploitation, and no violence in the name of God.

Thanksgiving is a good day to be reverential, to be penitential, to be repentant, and to ask to be cleansed and forgiven.

Thanksgiving is a good day to recite this Sioux prayer:

*O our Father, the Sky, hear us
and make us strong.
O our mother the Earth, hear us
and give us support.
O Spirit of the East,
send us your Wisdom.
O Spirit of the South,
may we tread your path of life.
O Spirit of the West,
may we always be ready for the long journey.
O Spirit of the North, purify us
with your cleansing winds.*

Amen.