

John Docherty, October 8, 2017
Thanksgiving 2017

Harvest festivals, and the sentiment of thanksgiving that goes with them, are probably among the oldest human traditions. At a time when the vast majority of the population of the planet depended on the harvest, or the successful hunt, it's not difficult to understand that there would be an outpouring of gratitude and a celebration when survival was assured for another season.

When you depend on the heat of the sun, and rain in appropriate quantities at the right time – not too much, not too little – it's easy to be grateful when the time of holding your breath and all the hard work is behind you and your crops are safely stowed away.

So it's not surprising that the ancient Hebrews were very conscious of their need to recognize the debt they owed to God every year.

In Exodus 23.10-21, we read the following :

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your home-born slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt.

No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.

You'll notice that the passage is not only an instruction to give thanks, but also a careful

recognition that this bounty is to be shared with those who share the land with you : the poor of your community; the wild animals; your domesticated animals; your servants; the foreigners who live among you; even the land itself needs to be cared for, and given rest from time to time.

It's a generous and responsible approach to life; an embrace of the fact that all of creation is interdependent, and that we have a duty to not only give thanks to God for life and the things that are necessary to life, but to ensure that those around us are also in a position to give thanks to God.

The reality for most of us, though, is that we are no longer farmers and hunters. We are no longer peasants scanning the skies for signs that the rains will come, and praying to God for a successful harvest. We might pray and be thankful for a secure job that allows us the means to walk down (or drive) to the local grocery store to buy what we need, but we're, at best, at arms-length from the immediate concern for fertile soil, good weather, and safe storage.

And so, I suppose then our Thanksgiving celebration is in some ways just a nice tradition held over from earlier days and older realities.

But we give thanks all the same. We *do* recognize that our very life is dependent on God's grace and provision and we quite rightly set aside time every year to acknowledge that.

But, unfortunately, our current reality is that *our* well-being, for which we are rightly thankful to God, is too often tied up in unhealthy ways with the well-being of those who are more directly responsible for providing the things we need to maintain our quality of life.

In other words, sometimes *our* well-being is enjoyed at the expense of someone else's well-being.

The bananas we eat are sometimes grown on land that has been taken from families who have lived there for generations.

The clothes that protect us from the elements and give us warmth are sometimes sewn in sweatshops where children and women toil in unhealthy or even dangerous conditions.

The petrol that powers our cars and allows us freedom of movement and leisure, is sometimes drawn from wells in areas where safeguards for local populations are limited or virtually non-existent.

The metals that provide the basic materials for our vehicles and infrastructures are sometimes drawn from mines that show little or no concern for the health and safety of the miners, or for the effects of their tailings on the people living nearby.

The electricity that lights and heats our homes is sometimes produced by turbines in dams that have flooded huge swaths of land and deprived entire communities of their traditional livelihoods, as well as poisoning the fish that would normally provide nourishment for those same communities.

So how do we give thanks to God with integrity, when we know that some of the things we are thankful for are causing suffering for others?

How do we embrace the call to give thanks, and also embrace the call to ensure that we make it possible for others to be in a position to give thanks?

Specifically, how do we in Canada give thanks to God for the blessings of *this* land when we know that those of us of European extraction enjoy those blessings at the expense of the indigenous peoples who were displaced, discriminated against, and diminished by our presence?

When the first European settlers came to the Americas, they were a mixed bag of every element of society.

Yes, there were conquerors; conquistadors eager to take control.

Yes, there were businessmen eager to enrich themselves and suck the land dry of resources.

Yes, there were missionaries eager to convert.

Yes, there were idealists or zealots eager to build a new society in a new land, oblivious to, or unappreciative of, the complicated societies that were already here.

But I'm convinced there were also ordinary men and women who had been forced out of their own homes and who came here hoping for at least a chance to build a life for themselves, and who had no particularly grandiose designs to eliminate those who were already here. That was certainly the case for many of the Scots and Mennonites who came.

But, of course, these ordinary men and women were also pawns in larger political and mercantile policies that needed loyal European bodies to build a new European society on the soil of these vast continents.

And these ordinary men and women had their own aspirations and hopes for what this land would provide for them and their descendants.

And I suspect at least some of them fed their dreams by drawing inspiration from scriptures like this passage from **Deuteronomy 26.1-10** in what I believe would be a misguided reading of its application to their lives :

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, you 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.

You 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.’

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘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.

When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Well, Canada isn't perhaps a land of milk and honey so much as a land of beer and maple syrup ...

So what do you do with a situation like this, as descendants of people who humbly and gratefully acknowledged a Creator who they believed had provided them with a place to build their lives?

I think one of the first steps to making things right is to recognize that there is a problem.

Another early step is to acknowledge the ways in which the European settlers in this land benefitted from their contact with indigenous communities;

to take stock of the ways our lives and traditions have been enriched by the First Nations who inhabited and tended this land before the Europeans arrived;

And so, in this Thanksgiving service today at MFM, we'll try to take that step.

We'll try to give our thanks to God while being mindful of the fact that we do this on traditional Mohawk territory.

As June mentioned at the beginning of the service, we've structured the rest of the service around a traditional Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address; the Haudenosaunee being the First Nations Iroquois confederacy that inhabited this part of this continent they called Turtle Island : the Mohawk, the Onondaga, the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Oneida and the Tuscarora.

I've reworked the wording of the address slightly to make it more possible for us as Mennonites to use it with integrity, given our different histories and understandings. I've also chosen to punctuate the various components with short Biblical passages, drawn primarily from the creation story in Genesis chapter 1, in an effort to ground this address in our own understanding of God and our own traditions of relationship; but also in an effort to bridge the language and symbolism that sometimes separates us.

I hope we've succeeded in doing this in a respectful and meaningful way.

You'll notice that our worship table is a little more spartanly decorated than would normally be the case for a special celebration like Thanksgiving. As we move through the service, we'll bring out various items symbolic of the components of the Haudenosaunee address, and we'll create a more traditional visual display. I invite you to take careful note of most of these items – items that we take for granted as part of our own heritage, but that were unknown to Europeans before contact with the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

As we enter into the sharing time later in the service, I invite you to add any other ways you feel we've benefitted from contact with our indigenous sisters and brothers.