

**Wednesday, November 27, 2024**

**Thanksgiving (Year B)**

Joel 2.21-27; 1Timothy 2.1-7; John 18.33-37

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Preached at St. Thomas of Canterbury, Long Beach*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1143886830590749>

*(Sermon begins at about 15:35)*

### **“Expressions of Thanksgiving”**

Most of us grew up with the image of Thanksgiving first being celebrated by the Pilgrims after their landing at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts. A feast celebrated in 1621 after the first harvest of crops in this new land. A feast celebrated with the local Natives who helped the Pilgrims get established in their new homeland. A feast celebrating the friendship between two very different peoples now sharing the same land. Such was the first Thanksgiving. Wrong!

Not that any of those facts are, strictly speaking, wrong. As my New Testament professor in seminary was fond of saying about virtually everything, “it’s more complicated than that.” A thanksgiving feast was indeed held in 1621 as a celebration of the first harvest in the Pilgrim’s new homeland, and local Natives were the honored guests. But the first? No. There were other thanksgiving celebrations on what is now American soil prior to the Pilgrims. In 1619, the colonists who landed in what is now Virginia held a celebration of thanksgiving for their safe arrival to their new home. But that was not even the first. When the Spanish arrived in what is now Texas in 1598, they held a celebration of thanksgiving for their safe arrival. But even that was not the first. Over three decades earlier, in 1565, the Spanish who arrived in what is now Florida held a celebration of thanksgiving for their safe arrival. Which does appear to be the first thanksgiving celebration on what is now American soil.

So, while the Pilgrims may not have been the first to celebrate Thanksgiving, they are the more well-known. Becoming the quintessential image of Thanksgiving. Perhaps because theirs was more elaborate, incorporating feasting and celebration with friends, whereas the others were more akin to worship services. Nonetheless, all were celebrations of gratitude for God’s providence: in being delivered safely to a new land, or in the case of the Pilgrims, gratitude for making it safely through the first winter in a foreign land, thanks to their new neighbors. Although all thanksgiving celebrations in our history have not been for such righteous or joyous purposes. A mere 16 years after the first Pilgrim thanksgiving, the governor of Plymouth Colony called for another thanksgiving. This time to celebrate the bloody victory over the massacre of Native Americans in the Pequot War.

Despite the complex, and at times, morally questionable justifications for celebration, offering thanks to God is part of our national history. Prior to the founding of our nation, celebrations of thanksgiving were more localized. The first national Thanksgiving Day celebration was called by George Washington. Held on November 26, 1789 this was “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God,” and calling on Americans to “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.”<sup>1</sup> It was not until 1863 when Abraham Lincoln formally established Thanksgiving Day as an annual national holiday. Although, even then, the intent was to explicitly give thanks for the Union’s military efforts in the Civil War.

Regardless of why thanks were being offered, be it for safe arrivals, for successful harvests, for a new nation, for military efforts in times of war, or even for a morally questionable victory, the heart of our Thanksgiving celebrations has always been the belief that God is the one who provides for all our needs. This most certainly reflects the Christian beliefs of early colonists who were instrumental in the formation of who we are as a nation. As such, we faithfully take time each year to offer our thanks to God for the blessings of the year.

Scripture demonstrates that offering thanks to God is a fundamental part of who we are as the People of God. Not just for us Christians but beginning with our Jewish forefathers and foremothers. The Old Testament is filled with stories of the people offering public thanksgiving to God for what he has done. One example is in our first reading from the prophet Joel. Here, the prophet announces deliverance from a plague of locusts, aggravated by a severe drought, which brought great destruction and loss of life to humans and animals alike. God has brought the people through this calamity and promises to compensate for the previous tragedy with great bounty from the land. Promising an abundance of rain, threshing floors full of grain, and vats overflowing with wine and oil. Because of this bounty, God declares, “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.” While not explicitly stated, the implication being that the people are to offer thanksgiving in response.

The harvest bounty provided by God has and continues to be one of the most common symbols of any celebration of thanksgiving. Perhaps because it is most tangible: rejoicing and giving thanks for what we can see and touch, what we can smell and taste. The bounty from God’s creation which provides for our physical wellbeing. The same theme we see reflected in our Gospel reading from Matthew. A reminder that God provides us with life and all that we need to sustain it. What we eat, what we drink, what we wear. As Matthew assures us, “indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” Again, invoking our thanksgiving in response.

It is in our Epistle reading where we see an explicit injunction to express our thanksgiving in a formal way. In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul is counseling and encouraging his protégé Timothy as to orthodox teachings and appropriate practices for the community Timothy is leading. The words we hear today are instructions regarding prayer in communal worship. As we heard, one of the primary forms Paul identified as central to worship are prayers of thanksgiving. Emphasizing the centrality of thanksgiving in our worship and our lives of faith.

While not part of this letter, it is worth remembering that our primary worship services are inherently centered around a particular form of thanksgiving: the Eucharist. The word “Eucharist” literally means “thanksgiving.” Eucharist being a sacrament in which we express thanksgiving for God’s grace in all that has been provided for us. Particularly for the greatest gift: the gift of God’s Son come among us in the flesh. The means by which we have received and are assured of our salvation: the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life.

Symbolized by elements from the bounty of nature: bread and wine. Which become Christ's body and blood, given for us. The bread and wine that provide for our physical and spiritual nourishment. A foretaste of the heavenly banquet which we will all one day share.

Thus far, we have been focusing on the communal aspect of thanksgiving. On the annual feast that we will celebrate tomorrow. On the religious and liturgical aspects and expressions through our acts of public worship: this night and every time we gather as the Body of Christ. All of which are important, to be sure. All focused on the central act of offering our thanks to God for what we have received.

As we gather together this night, as we prepare to gather together around dinner tables tomorrow, we are reminded that thanksgiving is about more than just the physical "stuff" we receive from God. It is also about the relationships that nourish us in our day-to-day lives. While I am always grateful to and for the people in my life, and regularly offer prayers of gratitude for them, I am also aware that I do not always express that directly. Perhaps you find yourself in the same boat. Our celebration of Thanksgiving is an opportunity, a reminder, of the need to express gratitude for those in our lives.

In a recent reflection, Scott Stoner, an Episcopal priest, and his wife Holly Hughes Stoner, both licensed marriage and family therapists, provided a simple framework for reflecting on gratitude for the people in our lives. Not just at this time of year, but throughout our lives. A framework based on three words: find, remind, and bind. I found this framework to be a helpful reminder and offer it to you as a Thanksgiving gift. I now quote from their reflection:

**Find:** Seek out fresh reasons to be grateful for the people in your life—family, friends, colleagues, and even those fleeting encounters with strangers. There's always something new to discover when we open our hearts to appreciation.

**Remind:** Once you uncover those moments of gratitude, don't let them go unspoken. As William Arthur Ward wisely said, "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." Remind others of how much they mean to you—not just for what they do, but for who they are. A kind word, a heartfelt note, or even a simple smile can make all the difference.

**Bind:** Gratitude isn't just a feeling; it's a force that strengthens the bonds between us. In a world woven together by interdependence, every act of appreciation reinforces the connections that hold us together.

So, as you navigate this season of thanks, keep these three words close to your heart: Find. Remind. Bind. They're a gentle reminder that gratitude, when shared, has the power to uplift us all.<sup>2</sup>

Gratitude and thanksgiving are a central part of who we are as people of faith. In our crazy and hectic world, it is sometimes easy to forget that. It is easy to let life slip by without offering a word of gratitude, be it to God or to a fellow pilgrim on life's journey. May our annual celebration of Thanksgiving be a reset, as it were, giving us the opportunity to recall who we are

as people of thanksgiving, and to make the expression of our gratitude an ongoing part of who we are.

I offer my gratitude for each and every one of you and for all you do as members of the Body of Christ, and in your ministries at St. Thomas of Canterbury and at St. Gregory's.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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<sup>1</sup> "Thanksgiving," Wikipedia, November 22, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving>.

<sup>2</sup> Holly Hughes Stoner and Scott Stoner, "Find, Remind, and Bind," November 22, 2024, The Wellness Compass Initiative, November 21, 2024. <https://www.wellnesscompass.org/column>.