

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA  
Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 2017  
The Rev. Bill Queen  
“How We Give Thanks”

Thanksgiving Day is here; soon we will be eating too much and nodding off to sleep, as bird and potatoes dissolve in our intestinal fires of digestion; but maybe I can grab your attention enough to rethink what we are about to do with just a bit more awareness about how we give thanks

first there may be a couple of differences of opinion about Thanksgiving that need to be cleared up; the main images we associate with Thanksgiving are probably the Pilgrims in their tall hats and buckle shoes; remember, those were the Pilgrims who left England seeking religious freedom: from who?: us, the Church of England!

but others will say that it wasn't the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts that inaugurated the Thanksgiving meal in 1621, but rather Church of Englanders at Berkeley Plantation just down the James River from here in Virginia in 1619; any Berkeley partisans here?; the only problem there is that the group's charter required them to observe annually the anniversary of their arrival in the New World with a day of prayer and fasting—not feasting!; I don't think I'd have much luck sending you home to not eat your turkeys today

and I'm not a Virginian, but a Floridian; so I might want to point out an additional historical precedent for Thanksgiving: that of the Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Avile whose men celebrated their safe arrival in Florida in 1565 with a special meal of thanksgiving; but they didn't speak English, and they were Catholics, so we can't give them any credence, right?

if we really want to locate the origins of an annual holy day of giving thanks, we have to go back even further in time and leave the Western Hemisphere behind; I'm thinking about the Biblical harvest festival of giving thanks, called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, described in Leviticus ch. 23; for seven days the Hebrew people observed it by living outdoors, in open framed structures, with loose branches as a roof, as is still done by many observant Jews; it was a reminder, after the first fruits of harvest had been offered to

God, of how the people had relied on God alone during their wandering in the wilderness; God didn't want them to get so comfortable in the land of milk and honey that they would forget about him, or forget that they themselves were not responsible for the bounty they had received

what effect might it have on us to sleep outside for a week at this time of year, with all of our neighbors doing the same thing?; imagine how this might increase our empathy for our homeless brothers and sisters who don't have any choice but to rough it outdoors; imagine how much more thankful for our food we might be, were we forced to prepare more simple meals that could be cooked outdoors; imagine how much more we might need to look out for our neighbors' needs and safety; imagine how much more thankful we might be for what we often take for granted the other 51 weeks of the year

I really don't expect any of you to scrap your plans for the rest of the day and all its traditional trappings; I'm not going to; but I would hope that we all will be more aware of what we have to be thankful for and how we go about giving thanks to God; maybe we can all let some of this Biblical vision of Thanksgiving shine in our hearts today; maybe we can all let this thankfulness continue in the days and weeks to follow, as we remind ourselves not to get too comfortable, and as we remind ourselves how completely dependent upon God we really are; and maybe we can think of some new ways to tweak our Thanksgiving traditions and try out some different things next year

and one last thing; what we're doing in this service today, this worship called Holy Eucharist, remember that 'Eucharist' is the Greek work for ..., you guessed it, 'thanksgiving;' after celebrating this Holy eucharist, this holy thanksgiving meal here at church, I pray that your Thanksgiving meal at home will be equally holy, and as spiritually fulfilling; do whatever you can do to make it so