

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Thanksgiving (26 November 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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## **Collect**

Almighty and gracious Father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great bounty, for the provision of our necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

*Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Psalm 65, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Luke 17:11-19*

## **1 Thanksgiving**

Today we celebrate a national holiday of Thanksgiving. This is not a holiday of the church, but one of the country in which the Episcopal Church is rooted. And like so many things about our country, its legacy is mixed. Thanksgiving means a lot of different things to different people.

I want to think with you for a moment today about Thanksgiving from two different points of view. Thanksgiving is a vaccine. And Thanksgiving is a protest.

## **2 Thanksgiving is a vaccine**

Thanksgiving itself is not a simple holiday. When I hear the term “Thanksgiving” I think of over-the-top meals that my extended family and friends have shared together. Or, more broadly, I think of those moments of life when I have felt gratitude, relief, sometimes even sobbing in my thankfulness for a relationship after a long separation, for a job after a dry spell without one, for a house and all that *that* represents. I associate Thanksgiving with good times.

The function of Thanksgiving, the purpose of gratitude in these good times is not only to show our appreciation to God and to other people, but also to be a vaccine. Like an immune system remembering the inert particles it will later battle when it encounters live viruses, gratitude takes these *good* things in our life and remembers them for future battles against the *hard* things in life. Thanksgiving recognizes good things as gift, as grace, as events beyond our control or deserving.

That is what our first reading is about: Moses urging the people, even in the midst of their anticipated wealth and ease and plenty in the promised land, not to forget where they came from. Not to forget that oppression in Egypt, slavery, and the wilderness are a part of their experience, arguably the more “normal” part. And it was in those times and places of difficulty that God took care of God’s people. So their enjoyment of the promised land is a gift from God, evidence of God’s concern and intervention on their behalf, and an invitation for them to bless God. It is also a vaccine.

Thankfulness is the vaccine that will prevent God's people from becoming embittered, cynical, and hardened by the more difficult times that are to come. Thanksgiving will enable God's people, even in war and famine and exile, to continue to hold onto God's goodness and trust that God is still at work. Thanksgiving is the vaccine which preserves spiritual health in the midst of hardship, allowing us to continue to worship, continue to love, continue to care, even in economic catastrophe, natural disasters, or even human-made ones. Gratitude is the catalyst that takes the good times and cements them into our memory as a vaccine that will protect us, make us more resilient, in the difficult times that inevitably come along.

### **3 Thanksgiving is a protest**

Thanksgiving is also a protest. It is a defiance and a repudiation of the doctrines and assumptions of the society around us.

In a world of wishful thinking and "me" oriented reasoning, thanksgiving represents defiance of social norms and the status quo. Thanksgiving enables us to see masks not as political statements or means of oppression, but as a gift that enables us to dramatically lower the risk of spreading a virus that we won't know we're carrying until a week too late. Thanksgiving enables us to embrace restrictive protocols not as an impingement on our religious freedom, but as practical ways to show genuine love for one another, in obedience to the command not of a government but of Jesus himself!

Thanksgiving enables us to defy the status quo not with violence, but with a rejection of the logic of cynicism and selfishness and raw power. Thanksgiving enables us to be gracious and loving to those who would make us their enemies. Thanksgiving teaches us that God, not me, is still in control, and that I don't have to be uptight and upset when things are not going the way I wish they would. Thanksgiving is the secret sauce that can help me to endure a broken tradition and to anticipate what God will do next.

Thanksgiving is a protest against the idols of selfishness, wishful thinking, and tribalism we find in the world around us. It is an alternative path, one leading to light and life and God.

### **4 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...**

So thanksgiving is a vaccine, and thanksgiving is a protest. But here's the best thing about thanksgiving: it doesn't have to be big. We don't have to thank God for the amazing forces at work in the universe and the grand philosophical truths of divinity. We ask God simply for our daily bread and we give thanks for that. We thank God for breath, for awaking this morning, for a momentary lessening of pain, for a single bite of something nourishing, for a gentle embrace or a single kind word. That's the amazing thing about thanksgiving: it is as powerful in these small things as it is in the big ones. So opportunities for thanksgiving can be found in every moment, no matter how inconsequential. And each act of thanksgiving does its work of vaccination and defiance.

[OTOH] 2020 has been a hard year, full of loss and hurt. 2020 has been a year for lament. [OTOH] 2020 has also been a year of grace, a year of God's presence. 2020 has been a year for rejoicing. These are both true. It is thanksgiving that will give us hearts big enough, tough enough, to hold these two realities at once.

God teaches us to give thanks and by giving us opportunities to practice it. God is present with us today. God has been good to us in the past. God has made great and un-breakable promises for us about the future. God is doing good in our lives even now, today. That is why today is a good day for us to celebrate Thanksgiving.

**Amen.**