

Lessons from Thanksgiving: The Pilgrims  
Deuteronomy 12:4-7  
November 22, 2009  
(Harvest/Thanksgiving & Commitment Sunday)

Last week I began a short, two part sermon series which looks at the participants in the very first Thanksgiving. Last week it was the Native Americans. Those that were here learned something about my past. In my late teens and early twenties I participated in Native American dances. Those that stuck around after the service got to see me in my full regalia. I don't know if they have made it to our web site, but pictures were taken of me.

I'm sure, seeing your pastor in Native American dance clothes made for a memorable Sunday. I hope though that besides remembering me dressed up, you also remember the point of my message. Squanto, the Pawtuxet Native that helped the Pilgrims demonstrated the concept of knowledge sharing.

We are to take our love and knowledge of God and share it with others.

Now we turn to the Pilgrims. Since I dressed as a Native, I thought why not dress as a Pilgrim.

(At this point I was dressed like a Pilgrim. I addressed the congregation in the first person, like I was William Bradford.)

Hello, my name is William Bradford. I am most famous for being the Governor of the Plymouth Colony. Besides that I was also one of the primary authors of the Mayflower Compact.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself, and the separatist movement I was a part of. I was born on March 19, 1590 in Yorkshire England. I married my first wife Dorothy in 1616. At the time of our marriage I was living in Leiden Holland.

I ended up in Holland because of my faith. You see I did not agree with much of what the Church of England was teaching. I joined a group of other separatists. Unlike the Puritans who wanted to purify the Church of England, we wanted nothing to do with that corrupt organization.

Since King James the 1<sup>st</sup> was the head of the Church of England, he made life tough for those that opposed the church. Feeling the heat, a bunch of us left England and went to Holland. We arrived in Amsterdam in 1609. We later moved to Leiden. Though we did not face persecution in Holland we did feel uneasy about how our children were being influenced by the Dutch culture. We also could sense the tension building between Holland and Catholic Spain.

We decided to move far away from England. We had heard about the Americas and thought that was the place for us. We made arrangements to travel to England aboard the Speedwell. Once in England we would pick up more supplies and people. Together the Speedwell and the Mayflower were to take us across the Atlantic.

Unfortunately the Speedwell began leaking and we had to head back to England. After some delay we finally left Plymouth England on September 6, 1620. When I say we, I mean 110 passengers plus the crew. Not all of the passengers were Pilgrims. There were 44 of us, and 66 others.

It was a very rough trip. Several people died while making the trip. Finally on November 10<sup>th</sup> we arrived. It was great to have the voyage over; the problem was we were in the wrong place. We had gotten permission to settle in the Virginia area. Instead of being in Virginia we were in the New England area, specifically Provincetown Harbor.

There were legal procedures that had to be followed to establish a Colony. I won't bore you with details; let's just say we had to have the Mayflower Compact in order to be legal.

We lived on the ship for a while and sent our search teams to find a permanent place for us. Finally we found the right place. Plymouth! It was when I had returned from Plymouth that I discovered my wife had died. Dorothy had fallen off the Mayflower. Her death was just one of many that first winter. Over 50 persons died that first winter.

I'm sure we would have lost more if it were not for Squanto and the other Wampanoag Indians. After we built the Colony he came and showed us how to grow numerous crops. He also showed us how to use plants for medicine.

We had a very fruitful summer and fall of 1621. In appreciation for all they had done for us we held a harvest celebration in honor of our Native brothers. Chief Massasoit and 90 others came to the celebration. The festival lasted 3 days. We had cod, eel, lobster, turkey, duck, swan, venison, pumpkin, peas, carrots, corn, and a whole lot more.

I guess I failed to mention that by the time we had our Thanksgiving feast I was the Governor of the Colony. Our first Governor, John Carver died in the spring of 1621. I was voted Governor that same spring and served as Governor off and on for over 20 years.

After the Mayflower the Fortune arrived in 1621 bringing more Pilgrims with her. In 1623 both the Anne and the Little James arrived in Plymouth, bringing more people to our Colony. It was on the Anne that my second wife, Elizabeth Southworth, came to the Colony. We ended up having 3 children, Edward, Mary, and Joseph.

It was not always easy, but God watched over us and blessed us. In good times and in bad times God is worthy to be praised. You can read more about my experiences in my own words, just look for *William Bradford of Plymouth Plantation*.

While preparing for this morning, I learned a lot about the Pilgrims. Even though we are taught the Thanksgiving Story when we are children, there is a lot that is left out. We focus on the meal and the motivation behind the meal.

Now that we have heard a little more information about the Pilgrims, what lesson can we learn from them?

How about the importance of having an attitude of gratitude!

In tough times and in good, the Pilgrims were appreciative of what God had done for them. Remember it was out of their religious convictions that caused them to come to this continent.

When they made it to the Fall and there was plenty of food to go around, they decided to invite the Natives to a feast, grateful for all they did to help them.

They could have just kept the bounty for themselves. There seems to be a human tendency to hoard rather than share. Going against that sinful urge, the Pilgrims shared.

When I think about that first Thanksgiving I recall the passage you heard this morning from Deuteronomy. God instructs the chosen people on how they are to worship. After making their offering it says in verse 7, “There, in the presence of the Lord your God, who has blessed you, you and your families will eat and enjoy the good things that you have worked for.”

Is not that the spirit of Thanksgiving? In gratitude for what we have, we enjoy a festive day of food and drink with family and friends.

Given their religious fervor, I’m certain the Pilgrims were aware of this passage from the Bible.

Though a time of Thanksgiving, the feast the Pilgrims had with the Native Americans was not a religious affair. In my research I discovered the Pilgrims had another feast that was more in line with the description in Deuteronomy. It was on that occasion they brought their offering to God.

Today you have been asked to bring in food for the Harvest Collection as well as a completed pledge card for 2010. I would like us to see a connection between what we are doing today and what the Pilgrims and the Israelites did.

If you look through the history of Judeo-Christian worship, you will find the when, where and how it has changed over the years.

As we heard in our lesson, worship for the ancient Israelites could only take place in one location. Since that location was a distance from where many Jews lived, the worship was infrequent.

Though there is many changes that have taken place over the years, the one constant has been the presentation of offerings. From the very beginning of this special relationship between God and the Israelites, God instructs the people to offer their sacrifices.

It’s not that God needs that which is offered. If we really think about it, everything is God’s anyway. The offering is just a tangible expression of

our love toward God. If we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul and mind and strength and we are grateful for what God has given us, we will use our offering as an expression of our worship.

If we have an attitude of gratitude toward God, then that spirit will spill over to other areas of our life. As I said, that is why I believe the Pilgrims shared their harvest with the Natives.

Though we ourselves are not harvesting our own produce, we acknowledge the riches we have acquired through our abilities, and purchase food for those in need. Following the lead of the Pilgrims we share what we have.

In that same the spirit of generosity and gratitude, we give financially to the church. In just a couple minutes we will receive the offering. As the plates come to you I invite you to place your offering if you have one and your pledge card into the plate.

Right now I would like you to pull out your commitment card.

If you don't have one, raise your hand.

Take a few moments to look it over.

Even if you do not wish to make a financial commitment, there are other ways to support the church.

Will you attend services Regularly?

Will you pray for the church?

What ways would you like to serve the church?

Will you witness to others about the love of God and the ministry of your church?

Think about these commitments, make any notations on the card and then put your name of it.

Like every Sunday, after the collection has been received we will stand up and sing **OUR** Doxology. I intentionally said our Doxology because if you go to most churches the doxology goes like this:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

I do appreciate what we sing. “We give Thee but Thine own, whate’er the gift may be; All that we have is Thine alone, A trust, O Lord, from thee.” That in a nutshell is what stewardship is all about. We acknowledge that we are managers of God’s creation. In an attitude of gratitude we worship God by presenting some of what we have.

The words we sing for our doxology actually comes from a hymn. The Hymn, “We Give Thee But Thine Own” was written by William How. Mr. How lived between 1823 and 1897. You won’t find this hymn in a Methodist Hymnal, but you will in a Lutheran.

We just sing the first verse, let me read the others.

2. May we Thy bounties thus  
as stewards true receive  
and gladly, as Thou blessest us,  
to Thee our first-fruits give!
3. Oh, hearts are bruised and dead,  
and homes are bare and cold,  
and lambs for whom the shepherd bled  
are straying from the fold.
4. To comfort and to bless,  
to find a balm for woe,  
to tend the lone and fatherless,  
is Angels’ work below.
5. The captive to release,  
to God the lost to bring,  
to teach the way of life and peace,  
it is a Christ like thing.
6. And we believe Thy Word,  
though dim our faith may be:  
whate’er for Thine we do, O Lord,  
we do it unto Thee.

Let me read the second verse.

In this spirit let us present our commitments and our offerings.

“May we Thy bounties thus  
as stewards true receive  
and gladly, as Thou blessest us,  
to Thee our first-fruits give.”