

October 11, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

The Message: Canadian Thanksgivings

[Video](#)

The first thing that Canadians say about Thanksgiving in a cross border conversation is that it is earlier than in the US -- a much more sensible time!

You might ask, "Why is it early?" (Though it may be we should be asking why the US is so late! But that's a sermon for south of the border.)

The historian Peter Stevens says that the date was decided around the turn of the last century because of another decision: that Thanksgiving celebrations should include outdoor sports and November was too cold. I guess they didn't ask the hockey players!

Stevens says that in Ontario between 1859-1914, sermons for Canadian Thanksgiving often focused on Canada's moral superiority to the United States. Since religious leaders believed that Canada never had slavery (it did, of course, which Stevens points out), they argued that Canada was the real chosen land; the U.S., after all, had recently been punished for its slaveholding past with a devastating civil war.

In 1865, the Globe and Mail ran an editorial calling for prayers to thank "Divine Providence" for the "special favours vouchsafed to our country during the past season," which included a good harvest and the end of a decade of economic turmoil. It also called for a standardization of services across the country to give it a more "national character," so that the impact of the prayers could be greater. The country that prays together, after all, stays together.

The first for the Europeans would have been in 1578 when Martin Frobisher, on his third voyage landed in Frobisher Bay.

The expedition was plagued by ice and freak storms which at times had scattered the fleet and on landing,

"..Mayster Wollfall, [Robert Wollfall] a learned man, appointed by her Majesties Councill to be their minister and preacher, made unto them a godly sermon, exhorting them especially to be thankfull to God for their strange and miraculous deliverance in those so dangerous places,...". They celebrated Communion and "The celebration of divine mystery was the first sign, scale, and confirmation of Christ's name, death and passion ever known in all these quarters."

That thanksgiving meal was either canned meat and mushy peas or even roast polar bear. In a sense, those thanksgiving roots are quite solemn -- thanksgiving for life in the context of continued hardship.

And of course there was the thanksgiving meal hosted by Samuel de Champlain in Port-Royal on Nov. 14, 1606, which saw settlers and Indigenous peoples breaking bread together in initial cooperation before smallpox and treaty violations followed.

But even farther back, there were many First Nations thanksgiving rituals for the harvest.

An 1890 feature in the Globe and Mail points to the waning of the seven-day ritual of Thanksgiving feasts central to the Haudenosaunee. That writer observed that these Thanksgiving feasts, which involved religious observance, visiting each other's houses, feasting and war dances, had been in existence from the time that the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was first organized—which may have pre-dated the Frobisher exploration by at least a century.

Whatever our thanksgivings are for: the end of war or beginning of peace; for survival from disease or continuation of health, for peace, justice and abundant harvest, the roots of our thanksgiving remembrances are quite solemn; they are part of a continuum of something that's been practised for thousands of years. God restores the land to the people of Israel after their own actions have resulted in its devastation. Frobisher gave thanks for life itself in the harshness of an unfamiliar land and climate.

There comes to each of us a moment when we discover we have what we need and find ourselves thankful even when life is hard.

Jesus tells us not to worry -- if we have listened to his teachings: being salt and light, obeying and fulfilling the law, being honest and forthright, working for God, loving enemies, giving to those in need quietly, praying quietly, fasting quietly, and treasuring God's gifts, If you have been working for God's kingdom, "THEREFORE I tell you, do not worry about your life!"

God gives us what we need -- whether we deserve it or not. Our relationship with God does not depend on being pure, or accomplished and certainly it does not depend on achieving possessions or position. It is only dependent on God's grace.

And so we gather, like Frobisher and his frostbitten men and the natives who fed them; we gather at the table, with a sense of awe and thanksgiving at the constant restoration that God works in our lives.