

This past Thursday was Thanksgiving and for many of us it was a time to gather with family and friends and eat a meal together. It is a day to gather and to give thanks for the bounty which we believe God has blessed us with over the past 12 months. For most of us, this was a year when the bounty was not as great as in other years. This is a time when many of us are facing job losses, salary cuts, maybe some very unfortunate circumstances due to other factors. Many of us may have found this to be a tough Thanksgiving.

I find myself recalling what it was like for folks who gathered for Thanksgiving in this country in the late 1920s. That, of course, is the period of our history known as the Great Depression. There are a few of us who can recall that period and others of us who have heard the stories. One of the great gifts that I have in my possession is a transcribed copy of my great grandfather's diary which he recorded during that period.

I am going to share some of his words he wrote in his diary in November of 1929 and 1930. During this period in my great-grandparents life, they were going through foreclosure on their family farm. In addition, their granddaughter, my Aunt Jane, had been diagnosed with polio and was facing several surgeries. I invite you to hear what life was like for them in 1929 and 1930 at the time of Thanksgiving.

“Done gathering a very short crop. 29 bales of cotton on 140 acres. Made very little corn and hay. We are only getting 30 gallons of milk from 19 cows. Clarence bought cows from Mr. Yates. I borrowed \$525 for him to be paid in 11 months. Jane Ann came home from hospital today after operation. Hope to get brace for her before January. Everything looks very gloomy. Poor crops and no work for the average man to do. Rhett (my grandfather) hopes to go to Chattanooga the first of January (to find some work).”

And then this comes next in the diary. “No one here but Peggie the dog and I. The day is very lonely but I have lots to be thankful for. I have health and work to do. I have 8 children. Most of them are a comfort to me and I am trusting that they may all find the right way before it is too late.”

Again, it was during this period that the farm was foreclosed on by the bank and my ancestors had to move away and find a new place to live. The place they moved to was the land where I grew up. Our ancestors who survived the great depression knew something very important. It didn't matter if you had a lot or you had a little. What was important was to be thankful for what you had. What was important was whether one had a lot or a little you were to be thankful to God.

In our recent history in this country, Thanksgiving has turned into a place to gather with family and eat lots of food. Is this a good idea? What would our ancestors think about the way we celebrate Thanksgiving today? I've been reading up on some of our national history and discovered what I think our ancestors would say about our celebrations of Thanksgiving. From what I've read, I think our pilgrim ancestors would have thought this was OK. The original Thanksgiving included lots of food and lots of games.

But there was something else which the pilgrims and puritans also connected to the ritual of Thanksgiving. To the pilgrims and Puritans, the community wide feast was also connected to a community wide fast, a day of public humiliation and prayer. The feast and fast were equal halves of the same ritual. Both customs were important religious rites.

Pleas for rain during spells of drought were the most common reason for fasting. During fasts the ministers railed against gluttony because it was believed that gluttonous people were not grateful people.

As we move into Advent and our preparation for Christmas, it would seem to me that our passage from Luke reminds us of how we are to prepare for Christmas. And the first thing we are to do is to not be weighed down with Thanksgiving gluttony but instead prayerfully focus ourselves to be alert. And if Scripture is our guide and if our history as a people gives us insight, then what we need to be about right now is fasting before God.

Our Thanksgiving feast is over. Now is a time for many of us to find a time in the next few weeks to set aside as a time to fast. But Presbyterians don't fast you may say to yourself. I want to read to you what our Book of Order says about fasting. The Book of Order is one half of our church constitution.

Read W-1.2003

W-1.3013

W-5.5003

I invite you to set aside some time before Christmas to fast. It really doesn't have to be all that difficult. If we fast from sun up to sundown then you could easily eat a healthy breakfast before the sun rises and a healthy supper after the sun goes down. Really the only meal you would need to give up is a noon time meal. I am going to be fasting tomorrow. I am fasting tomorrow because tomorrow is a day that someone in my life is in great need of prayer.

Earlier this morning your Session gathered around me and laid hands on me and lifted up some very specific prayers. They did that because here in Allison Creek we believe in the power of prayer. We may not see the results that we may want to see but we believe ultimately that prayer is a way to connect us to God and to one another.

Why were my great-grandparents and so many others able to be thankful in the 20s and 30s when life was so tough? At the time they were losing their farm to foreclosure? I believe it had something to do with their personal nurture of their spirituality.

If you choose to fast tomorrow or during another day over the next few weeks before Christmas, each time you feel a hunger pain, I invite you to see this pain as an invitation to be in prayer. Lift up prayers for your family, prayers for your church community, and prayers for unknown folks facing difficult times.

Last week was a great time of feasting. And I hope that as you gathered around the table you were able to say thanks whether or not you felt the year has brought great bounty or much hardship. Our ancestors knew a lot about lifting up prayers of thanksgiving during tough times.

But now the Thanksgiving holidays are over. There is something which we are now invited to move into. Next on our agenda is an invitation to fast and pray.  
AMEN.

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-Thanksgiving pilgrim info from East, Elyssa, "A Moveable Feast," NY times, 11/23/09

-Text: Ezra 8:21-23 & Luke 21:34-36

-Given: Nov. 29, 2009 in Allison Creek Pres (York, SC)