

"Thanksgiving 2010: Are We Pilgrims Still?"

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 100

Philippians 4:4-9

John 6:25-35

"Let's talk turkey." It means to speak plainly about a difficult or awkward subject, or it may refer to pleasant chitchat. Or the actual sounds a turkey makes. "Turkey gobbling was a distinct, natural sound on frontier farms." So, to "talk turkey" meant to skip the pleasantries and get to what's important. So let's skip the small talk and get to the big talk.

Language is so crucial to the human experience. Linguists estimate that there are 6,809 "living" languages in the world today, but 90 per cent of them are spoken by fewer than 100,000 people, 46 are known to have just one native speaker. That gives a whole new meaning to talking to yourself. "There are 357 languages with under 50 speakers. "People just don't want to learn a language because they know there are so few others who can speak it," Bill Sutherland, a population biologist, says.<sup>[i]</sup> A language can disappear and once it is gone, it can't be recovered.

There's one particular language that concerns me. While it doesn't belong to the official family of languages, I call it the language of Thanksgiving. In our polyglot, rude, ill-mannered culture, the language of thanksgiving is in danger of disappearing. So, do you speak Thanksgiving? After all, the language of our culture is not thanksgiving. Would you like to learn to speak Thanksgiving?

**We can't speak Thanksgiving without learning the language of the Native Americans.** The school version of the Thanksgiving story is an incomplete tale. Bill Troller argues that we can and should make Thanksgiving a more "profoundly spiritual holiday."<sup>[ii]</sup> That entails remembering that in the years just prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims, diseases brought by their fellow Europeans ravaged Native American tribes in New England. An estimated 80 million out of 100 million total Indians in North and South America died of disease in what historians call the greatest demographic disaster of all time. The Puritans would not have survived without the assistance they received from Native Americans.<sup>[iii]</sup> We would be glossing over the meaning of Thanksgiving without reminding you that the harmony between Pilgrims and Indians ended just over a year after the first Thanksgiving.

We should celebrate Thanksgiving with the recognition that our country was built upon foundations laid by native peoples. We should approach

Thanksgiving in a celebratory mood that is tempered by a "spirit of sadness and repentance acknowledging that the first Thanksgiving is an ideal that we as a nation and we as Christians have too rarely realized."<sup>[iv]</sup> Remember ideals can be a spur to greatness or a sickness that produce hard-core, blind ideology.

**The language of Thanksgiving is incomprehensible without learning the language of the Pilgrims.** A group of English Separatists, "Puritans with a vengeance," set sail on the Mayflower seeking a land of religious freedom. The voyage took sixty-five days. They lived in between the deck and the hold, a crawl space not more than five feet high. They brought food, water, firewood, and beer – all of which was either gone or nearly gone before the trip was over.<sup>[v]</sup>

They knew the danger. By the time the Pilgrims set sail, 3,000 of the 3,600 English colonists at Jamestown had died. Oh my they knew the danger!

**They fervently believed that God wanted them to do this and would provide for them.** "We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us and will graciously prosper our endeavor," they wrote. Their leader, William Bradford, said, "**They knew they were Pilgrims.**"

Fifty-two of the 102 died the first winter. With the aid of friendly Native Americans they planted their first crops that spring. By September they had a crop of corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley (which meant they could have beer). William Bradford wrote, "They gathered the fruits of their labors: it is time to rejoice together after a more special manner." This is the feast we now celebrate as Thanksgiving. The Native Americans arrived, bringing five freshly killed deer. So the feast included vegetables, geese, ducks, wild turkey, venison, striped bass, bluefish, cod, and whiskey. A veritable Puritan feast – not an oxymoron. There were no mashed potatoes.

With the odds stacked so severely, they should have all been dead by spring. "Their survival was a testament to their grit, resolve, and faith." **THEY KNEW THEY WERE PILGRIMS.** They were tough and willing to "screw their courage to the sticking point when their time came." Some Christians are soft-headed; from time to time they read their Commandments wrong and weaken in the faith. But note these English Separatists. They were pilgrims – God yes. Do we know that we are Pilgrims still? A people undeterred by unspeakable odds. In 2 Chronicles 14:9 we read, "Zerah the Ethiopian came out against Judah with an army of a million men." Talk about bad odds. King Asa, didn't back down: "Help us,

O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude." A people with a mission more than a home. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your father's house to the land that I will show you.' So Abram went." A people on a journey not a cruise. A people who live by hope. A people who will risk life and limb for a cause greater than their own. A people who keep fighting battles we thought were already won. A people prepared to pay any price, give any gift, and do any work to carry out this mission?

**The writers of Scripture can teach us the language of**

**thanksgiving.** The story of the first Jewish thanksgiving is in our Deuteronomy reading: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruit of the ground, that you, O Lord have given me." There is a sense that the Psalter – a collection of hymns and poems – is the continued story of thanksgiving: "O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples" (Psalm 105:1). "Enter the gates of God with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

We can't live a story we don't know or speak a language we don't live and practice.

**The poets can help us speak the language of thanksgiving:** gratitude for the gift of life, of every day, of every moment as precious. The language of possibilities. The poet Wallace Stevens: "It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible. It must be that in time the real from its rude compounding come . . . . To be stripped of every fiction except one. The fiction of an absolute." Poetry gives us the sense of what is possible and rescues us from a flat, reduced, trivial prose. Each dawn is charged with possibilities; each Lord's Day with a new beginning wrapped in forgiveness. When I open a new ream of paper, five hundred bright white empty sheets, I hold them next to my ear and use my thumb to flutter the pages and think of all the possible words that will soon fill those pages.

Come to a poetry reading and learn that every day is Thanksgiving, that a day without thanksgiving is a poorly lived day. If we don't share, if we don't give thanks, we will not notice that we are alive. Hear poetry as the human spirit's resistance to technology which often can reduce life to robotic repetition and meaningless work.

Here's Jane Kenyon, one of my favorite poets: I got out of bed on two strong legs. / It might have been otherwise. / I ate cereal, sweet

milk, ripe, flawless peach. / It might / have been otherwise . . . .

We ate dinner together / at a table with silver / candlesticks . . . . / I slept in  
a bed / in a room with painting on the walls, / and planned another day. /  
But one day, I know / it will be otherwise.

*Here's Mary Oliver, in her poem, The Summer Day:*

"I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

*And Pattiann Rogers, in her poem, The Greatest Grandeur:*

But it is the dark emptiness contained  
in every next moment that seems to me  
the most singularly glorious gift,  
that void which one is free to fill  
that space large enough to hold all  
invented blasphemies and pieties, 10,000  
definitions of god and more, never fully filled, never.

The poets singing their songs are a renewable spiritual resource against  
technology's dulling, deadening impact on our souls. God isn't a character in  
our lives; God is the plot.

Thus, the true poet, (Walt Whitman: "Finally shall come the poet worthy otht  
name, the true son of god shall come singing his songs." Of course  
Whitman has a different poet in mind than I do but the poetry allows me to  
give a different meaning.) For Christians, the true poet is the one who came  
unto his own, singing his song, "The kingdom of God is here and now, in this  
one moment," the one who was rich and for sake became poor, the one who  
emptied himself taking the form of a slave, the one who became obedient to  
the point of death – even death on a cross, the one through whom God was  
pleased to reconcile all things, this Jesus, whom I declare to you, is the  
primary speaker of thanksgiving. He is the most crucial renewable spiritual  
resource in the world. When we give God thanks and praise and pass bread  
and wine, we offer the world the one who promised "Whoever comes to me  
will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be

thirsty.” John 6:35. It is the language of Jesus that finally saves us from the American civil religion and its over-cooked romanticism. Jesus gives us the reason for Thanksgiving that matters most of all.

Sure, we are going through a rough spot, but the best time to speak thanksgiving is in adverse and difficult times. When you are between a rock and a hard place, speak thanksgiving. When you are at the end of your rope, speak thanksgiving, when difficult people have stepped on your last nerve, speak thanksgiving. First thing in the morning, start your day saying, “ **My God, it is good to be alive.**”

The Methodists have a tradition of singing a hymn at the end of Annual Conference each year. It’s a Charles Wesley song, “And Are We Yet Alive?” The first verse goes like this:

And are we yet alive,  
And see each other’s face?  
Glory and praise to Jesus give  
For his redeeming grace.

MY GOD, IT IS GOOD TO BE ALIVE!

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

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[i] Bill Sutherland, “Alarm Raised on World’s Disappearing Languages.” [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org). 2003. Sutherland is a population biologist.

[ii] William Vance Trollinger, Jr., “The First Thanksgiving: The Rest of the Story.”

[iii] We should also make sure that we include the experiences of Squanto as a case study of the negative effects of European expansion upon native peoples. Squanto was captured and shipped overseas to be sold into slavery. Somehow he escaped and landed in England, where he learned to speak English. Then in 1619 he was employed as a guide for an expedition to New England and he returned home. In 1621, he came to Plymouth and offered his services to the Pilgrims. He taught them a host of survival skills.

[iv] Trollinger, “The First Thanksgiving: The Rest of the Story.”

[v] Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*.