

November 18, 2018  
Harvest Sunday  
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Christ Church, Exeter

## Harvest Hope

The mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that, "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough." The desire to give thanks, to be thankful, to say thank you, is at the center of all relationships, including our relationship with the God who made us and imagined us into being. You and I organize our Sunday worship around this idea when we celebrate the Eucharist – Holy Communion. Jesus took bread, and when he had *given thanks* to God -- the meaning of the word.

This morning our primary focus is how we experience God in giving and receiving, planting and gathering – the harvest being our dominant idea and image for the day. We also make an invitation and an ask that will help strengthen our community as agents of compassion, service and reconciliation to our world. This is a time for households to consider how you can support our work and what we hold in common and in trust here in 43 Pine Street in Exeter by making a pledge to contribute financially in the year ahead. Many households have already received Annual Giving cards in the mail, but if yours did not arrive we have more in the back narthex or lobby.

We are only days away from celebrating Thanksgiving Day. The first Thanksgiving was celebrated nearly 400 years ago in Plymouth, MA, about a two-hour drive from here. We learned the story as children. (I remember making pilgrim hats out of construction paper and turkeys by tracing the fingers of my hand) The Pilgrims, having fled England in order to freely practice their religious faith – (they fled our Mother Church of England lest we forget) celebrated a meal with the local Wampanoag Indians to commemorate the first harvest. The sad irony has not been lost, in that the Indians taught the newly arrived immigrants how to survive by foraging the woods and beaches for berries and other plants. There were no apple or pumpkin pies, turkey and stuffing at that first feast, which lasted 3 days, but local staples such as corn, codfish, lobster and roasted goose.

Over time this harvest festival took on religious meaning and later a national purpose. Finding one set day for the entire nation to gather in their homes to give thanks was seen as a way to strengthen national unity in the early days before the Civil War. Presidents make proclamations. The day's essence remains its power to unite and bring together. To gather families and friends, who might not see each other that often during the year, around a common table. Unite, at least for one day, an ever-divided nation, to share a meal. Even for those households that express no religious faith, many will pause and go around

the table and share what they are most thankful for. And as the mystic said, that would be enough.

The collect for Thanksgiving Day in The Book of Common Prayer rounds out the day's full meaning for us: 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.

We give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and the labors of those who harvest them. How accessible is the idea of harvest for us today? Beyond the brief bounty of our summer gardens, you and I are often hundreds if not thousands of miles away from the sources of the food we eat. Our salmon is farm raised in Norway, our strawberries from Mexico, apples from Chile and clementine oranges from Spain. Without the vast farms in the Central Valley of California, few of us would even see fresh vegetables through the long winter. We have largely been separated from nature's harvest.

A couple months ago, when a small group of us started making plans for our Cuba night event, we talked about how advertising a "pig roast" might put some people off. I think there is some truth in that. But we went ahead with the plan. When we roasted an entire 100-pound pig -- head, tail, crispy skin and all -- and it was interesting, but not surprising, how curious and a bit squeamish some people got. We are just not used to it. It was a rare experience to see a whole animal right in front of us being divided up for a feast. Our food comes to us wrapped, boxed, sliced, processed and often fully prepared. Heat and serve. We have gained convenience, productivity and scale, but what we may have lost in the process is the urgency and hope that came with a good harvest.

The people of Israel knew what has largely faded for us and harvests hold a central place in theirs and our faith story. There were rules and customs.

Exodus 23: 16 You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Quite simply, the first of what was gathered, was offered back to God. It oriented how the people saw their lives.

Our Thanksgiving Day prayer includes giving thanks for the labors of those who harvest. We, even for a moment, consider those who planted, worked the fields, and even today with technology and Big Agriculture, still stand, bent over for hours each day, to pick the food we will consume – without their labor we would not enjoy what we do.

In the Old Testament, we are introduced to ancient social safety net (Leviticus 23:22) When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or

gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God. Our right is not to take it all. Our duty is to allow others to share what we have been given. That is the core teaching of our faith that we get to lift up and sharpen each Thanksgiving.

The rhythm and formula of harvest is straight forward. In the spring, the ground is prepared. The seeds are sown. As the crops grow, one has to care for what is growing. Jesus described this phase like this: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. (Matthew 13) Take care, pay attention, watch out for that which might come and get between you and what God desires. In a broken world, there will always be peoples, forces, movements that are driven not by thankfulness, care and love but by power, vengeance, greed and fear.

Even if we are somewhat disconnected from actual harvests, we have a role to play. Jesus uses the image of the harvest to describe the mission field that is our world: Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great bounty.

God planted us here in Exeter, New Hampshire at the end of the Civil War. This parish has lived through other wars, great depressions and recessions, prosperity and peace. We have baptized, married and buried generations of believers. We have made a statement by the investment we have made in our renovated space.

We gather, each week over those 153 years, to worship, support one another through our day and to find a way to go out into the world and make of it something God would hope for. We are the laborers of God's harvest: where all are welcome to join us in this holy work and feast with us all that God can give. If you find yourself on the edge, move a little closer. If you haven't yet made a formal commitment to support this work, consider it this year. The more households giving out of thanksgiving, will help us plan and do what God is calling. If you've been at the same place or level for some time, maybe this is year to step out and step up your giving to see if what they say is true: that something happens when we give to something beyond our selves.

"If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough." May that be our last thought as we go to bed tonight and our first prayer as we rise again on a new day.