

# St James United Church



## Message for October 8, 2023

### Thanksgiving Sunday

“Remembering Relationships” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Deuteronomy 8:7-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Excerpt from *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho

Like most Canadians, I sometimes like to compare us and our American neighbours, pondering what we share, what sets us apart, and things we share yet are quite different. One similarity is how we both have Black Friday sales, though the date is based on their Thanksgiving, not ours. That we have a sale based on a US holiday says a lot about their cultural dominance. Case in point, though our Thanksgiving is not connected to a myth about a meal shared by English settlers and Wampanoag, once the children’s ministry facilitator at a former congregation was all set for the kids to do a Thanksgiving activity with Pilgrim imagery. We made some changes.

As annoying as I find the reach of American influence, I also find something appealing about them having a founding story for their Thanksgiving. The best we can point to is a celebration by Martin Frobisher in 1578 after he and his crew safely crossed the Atlantic in their search for the Northwest Passage. The American story of diverse peoples sharing a great banquet is powerful, even if the real meal was decidedly Pilgrim-centric. The tale began to be told and retold after the Civil War as a way to help knit the nation back together. They needed this fabled meal as a new origin story to help them move forward in greater harmony and inclusion, something to remember other than a divisive war.

We get something similar in Deuteronomy. The whole book retells Exodus through Numbers as the people prepare to settle in the land of their ancestors. Like the first Thanksgiving, this was an origin story they could point to and help them move forward as a people, especially how God had rescued them from enslavement, then provided for them as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. As Moses foreshadowed in today’s reading, they would need to go back to that story and remember all that God had done, because once things were going well for them, it would be easy for them to stop thanking the source of their good fortune and to assume their blessings were all down to them.

This highlights for me how remembering and gratitude go together. We express this in practices to help us cultivate gratitude like taking time before bed to take stock of the day, or keeping a gratitude journal where you list your blessings. They’re all about memory. Taking stock in this way helps us not only to appreciate what we have but to navigate life’s ups and downs as we recall the good and not just the bad. It help us be less susceptible to envy and resentment, leading to greater joy in our lives, or as the sign out front says, to see more beauty. And it turns out not only does memory help us in our gratitude but vice versa. When we’re grateful in the midst of an experience we are having, we actually imprint the experience better into long term memory and can then recall it with more detail.

A clear example of a memory plus gratitude exercise is the Thanksgiving tradition we did in our Learning Together Time as we all considered something we're grateful for from last year. Did you notice how often what people are grateful for wasn't material but rather more relational? It's telling that we most often think of people, and if it is a place or object we are grateful for, it is often because we shared it with someone. That says a lot about who we are, even as our world gets more caught up in material pursuits. Reflecting in this way is an antidote, drawing us out of ourselves, helping us engage with other people, be more conscious of other creatures in our surroundings, of God's presence too, of the many layers of relationships we have in our lives.

It's a reminder that simple things more than fancy things are our greatest treasure, something the boy learns in *The Alchemist*. In the story he goes on a great journey to find a treasure he kept dreaming of only to discover that the treasure was back home. But he needed to go to Egypt just the same because like any of us he wouldn't have believed that his treasure was right under his nose. And though there is a buried treasure in the story, it's not the greatest treasure he found. That was his experiences, like seeing Tangiers or the pyramids, and meeting people, like the fortune teller, the crystal trader or the alchemist. In the end the greatest treasure was the simplest, the gift of his relationships.

This is the crux of what Moses was telling the Israelites, to remember who they were in God and who God called them to be for each other. As we heard, God gave them ten words, often called commandments. The first in Jewish tradition is considered a preamble in the Christian: "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of slavery." It's the core of the teaching they received at Sinai, that God rescued them in their greatest need, doing so because they were in relationship. All the things God told them to do in the other nine sayings, was about that, not just how they treated God, but how they were to treat each other, especially others in greatest need. And they needed this origin story. It's why Deuteronomy plus Exodus to Numbers is the same story told twice. Moses needed them to remember because the opposite was likely – they'd forget who God was, what God provided, then forget each other and stop looking after each other.

Sadly, it seems that we live in a world where we have forgotten. You only need to drive along the Parkway and see the tent village out front of the Confederation Building to see how much, even here in Newfoundland and Labrador where looking after each other is the only way you survived. But all is not lost. It's why we have Thanksgiving, a holiday to remind us that helping each other is really what we're about. As prominent as eating is in the holiday, sharing is its heart. We bring blessings to mind, and as Paul suggests, give thanks to God, but key is that we gather in relationship. We gather not just to eat but to eat together. We not only give thanks for our relationships but renew them. And as we reflect on our blessings, we are reminded to reach beyond our table, again as Paul suggests, to share our blessings with others.

I began this reflection jealous we don't have a "first Thanksgiving" like our American neighbours. But as I reflect on our readings I realize we have one as fitting as a great banquet. We have Martin Frobisher and his crew giving thanks for safe arrival, made possible because they worked together, because they'd looked out for each other. That feels more like us as Canadians, as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. May that be our Thanksgiving this year and into the future, a time to remember who we are and how we are to look after each other, both around the table and out in the community. Amen.