

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
November 21, 2021  
Abundant Thanksgiving or Gratitude?

Readings

Psalm 36:7-8

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

2 Corinthians 9:8-10

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

Luke 12:48b

... From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Colossians 3:17

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Ephesians 1:16

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

James 1:17

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Message

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge we are all zooming from the ancestral lands of traditional custodians. For our meeting house this is the Tongva

people. “Land acknowledgment is a justice practice to actively disrupt the colonizer narrative and honor Indigenous resistance.”<sup>1</sup>

This week we celebrate the national holiday of Thanksgiving with all its’ history and traditions. Every culture teaches thanksgiving and gratitude, but there is a difference between the two. Thanksgiving is the expression of gratitude, especially to God. It is an act like all the others we do. For many people Thanksgiving is a day to stop and give thanks- one in 365. Gratitude is the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation and return kindness. Gratitude is an attitude of the mind, heart and soul- like abundance. There is a big difference between saying thank you and living in gratitude which acknowledges the abundance of life.

A Friend wrote about the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address Greeting to the Natural World,<sup>2</sup> spoken at social and religious meetings. This call and response prayer is an ancient message of peace and appreciation of Mother Earth and all her inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> It acknowledges our duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things in the cycle of life. It expresses thanks to the Mother- the Earth who provides everything we need, to the waters which are life, and the fish who purify the water and give us food. It acknowledges plants that sustain many

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Christ Bergstrom, Land Acknowledgment

<sup>2</sup> also known as the Iroquois Confederacy or Six Nations<sup>2</sup>, Āi Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora)

<sup>3</sup> <https://quakerrecolaborative.org/thanksgiving-and-native-american-heritage-month>

life forms. Prayed at the opening and the ending of gatherings, it reconciles, centers and draws the people together in the network of life as they respond to each expression of gratitude: “Now our minds are one.”

The readings for today are a small sample of many verses in the Bible about gratitude and giving thanks. Acknowledging God’s abundance, steadfastness, and benevolence is a primary theme in many stories, psalms and letters. “Give thanks to God, God’s love is steadfast, we feast on the abundance!” The second theme naturally follows. We are called to co-create, sharing God’s abundance in care and compassion. “God provides every blessing in abundance, so we always have enough and can share abundantly in God’s good work.”

These Indigenous and Biblical expressions of thanks bring a query: Can we use tradition and stories to move from acts of thanksgiving to abundant gratitude? One idea is to read from a “critical” perspective and ask: Whose voice is missing? Usually we hear messages from the victorious, the majority and the patriarchy of exceptionalism, triumphalism and chosen-ness. How can we hear other messages?

The People of First Light (Wampanoag) lived with the land for 10,000 years, hunting deer, elk and bear in the forests, fishing for herring and trout and harvesting clams in the rivers and bays. They planted corn and used fish remains as fertilizer. In the winter, they moved inland from the harsh weather, and in the

spring they moved to the coastlines. There were 69 villages, each with a chief, or sachem, a medicine man, and messenger runners to communicate between villages.

Then explorers came. Some traded but others attacked. Ninety years later explorers became invaders. They kidnapped twenty of the People including Tisquantum (who they named Squanto) to sell as slaves. Over the next five years the People were nearly wiped out by mysterious disease; from feces of rats aboard invader's ships, smallpox or yellow fever. Known as "The Great Dying," the pandemic lasted three years. Two-thirds of the People died.

When more invaders arrived called colonists the People thought things would be different because "You don't bring your women and children if you're planning to fight." The first winter half of the colonists died due to cold, starvation and disease. The People faced an impossible situation; ravaged by disease they needed to protect themselves from another tribe and the colonists had better weapons. The People taught the colonists to plant beans and squash in a mound with maize around it and use fish remains as fertilizer. They weren't being kind or friendly, but were in dire straits and desperately trying to not become extinct.

The harvest was successful so the colonists held a feast. The People weren't invited. The colonists celebrated by shooting muskets and the People feared they were headed to war. One hundred warriors came running with a mohawk "roach" made from porcupine hair strapped to their heads- not feathered headdresses.

When they learned it was a harvest celebration, the People joined, bringing five deer to share. There was fowl, fish, eel, shellfish and cranberries from the bogs.

“[This] Thanksgiving kicked off colonization... The lives of the People changed dramatically with disease, servitude and so many things that weren't good...” The colonizers did not give them a better, superior life. Over the years they made it illegal and “punishable by death” to teach the People to read or write. The colonizers forced the People to convert to Christianity with a “pray-or-die policy... The People were pushed off the land, land held in common was divided up, and a system of taxation was put in place antithetical to the People's culture.

Later the People's children were sent to boarding schools, forced to cut their hair, abandon their “Indian ways,” and stop speaking their language. The motto was: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” Much later when a schoolteacher told the Thanksgiving tale a child asked, ““What happened to the Indians?”” The teacher answered, ‘Sadly, they're all dead.’ But the People are still here. They persevered and found a way to stay. At the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thanksgiving the People were not allowed to tell their story so they created a National Day of Mourning. This year is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>4</sup> The first Thanksgiving was one act. It may have been abundant. But it was not gratitude. And it was not abundant gratitude.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/this-tribe-helped-the-pilgrims-survive-for-their-first-thanksgiving-they-still-regret-it-400-years-later/>

Friend Eliza Gurney met with Abraham Lincoln and corresponded with him regularly. In 1863 Eliza wrote to express “cordial approval of thy late excellent proclamation appointing a day of thanksgiving” despite the fact as a Quaker she did “not set apart especial seasons for returning thanks.” She approved a way to make less devout Americans conscious of their God-given blessings.<sup>5</sup> [Quakers] ...did not celebrate- any holy days, or holidays... every day was Thanksgiving... How would our lives be different if we looked at each day this way? How would we treat one another? What would our families look like? How would this strengthen our relationship with [God]? Would it color how we saw the world...?<sup>6</sup>

There is a saying “you cannot fill another’s cup when yours is empty.” It is certainly true we must take care of ourselves- especially in an emergency we must first put on our life jackets and oxygen masks. But we cannot live in a perpetual state of emergency. For instance, many of us were fine with staying home to keep others and ourselves safe when the pandemic first started. In those first weeks and months there were plenty of challenges to keep us busy, adapting all the things we did out in the world to virtual space. We had to be creative!

Yet over time that did not satisfy. I missed serving with others. I had to get creative finding ways to do things with and for others. We need to live a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/church-history/article/abs/open-for-business-philadelphia-quakers-thanksgiving-and-the-limits-of-revolutionary-religious-freedom/6A9FED6C19A58F8B495853254C8A0D1A>

<sup>6</sup> <https://colonialquills.blogspot.com/2015/11/quaker-thanksgiving.html#:~:text=The%20Quakers%20believed%20that%20Christ,Every%20day%20was%20Easter.>

meaningful life with meaningful activities. It is why so many “fail” at retirement and perhaps why people who retired during the pandemic are now re-joining the workforce. Even when our cup is empty we have a need to fill another’s cup.

Lest you think this means “getting out there” and doing something big and important, or are thinking, “I do not have the capacity to ‘get out there,’” or “I do not have the capacity to do one more thing! Here is the simple solution I found. I spend time with people who are grieving or going through challenging situations, those we might think have empty cups. I do this not because I want to but because I need to. Like the People “it isn’t kind or friendly,” my cup is empty and if I do not do it I am “in dire straits and desperately trying to not become extinct.” I have found that we fill each other’s cups when we give our trust and time simply by being present. Especially when we learn to do this with mutuality- both giving and receiving in abundant gratitude.

At 3:00 we will celebrate gratitude with a video for the community. Many of you are in the video speaking things we are thankful for. But “gratitude...enables us to recognize and receive the goodness others possess in a way that transforms us. It is about awareness but also openness and receptivity and willed dependence. ... it is essential to love. The more grateful we are, the more we are able to participate constructively, helpfully, and respectfully in the lives of others. And the more we welcome their participation in our lives...

Gratitude should not end with “thanks God.” It should end with generosity, with justice for others. It should lead us to share what we have because what we have comes only partially from personal initiative and ingenuity and primarily from the gifts of others or from historical accident.”<sup>7</sup> In other words every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation...

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<sup>7</sup> <http://mattboswellphd.com/on-quakers-and-the-cost-of-gratitude>