

**Thanksgiving Day – Deuteronomy 26:1-11**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ**

***Giving Thanks for Forgiveness***

*"Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."*

These words are traditionally attributed to Moses as part of three speeches he delivered to the Israelites prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. Moses reminded the people how God brought them out of Egypt and released them from affliction, toil, and oppression. He reminded them of the importance of following God's teachings that they may inherit a land flowing with milk and honey. And he reassured the Israelites of God would be faithful even when they were not. Although contemporary scholars determined that several different authors wrote the Book of Deuteronomy over several periods of time,<sup>1</sup> the Law of Moses has become a touchstone for generations of believers.

One of the main themes of today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures includes offering tithes of the harvest to God in thanksgiving for all that God provides. A tithe of the first fruits of God's bountiful gifts should be presented during the Festival of the Weeks – seven weeks of celebration with family members, slaves, strangers, orphans and widows, and resident aliens in our

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV augmented 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press (2007), 240 Hebrew Bible.

towns.<sup>2</sup> The theme of tithing is carried forward into our own faith communities as a practice of sacrificial giving toward the ministries of the church that God's word may be known and lived into with all our neighbors. We offer our gifts of money and bread and wine each week when we celebrate the Liturgy of the Table. All of these gifts have been given to us by the grace of God, and we are offering them for the benefit of all who share in the celebration of Holy Communion – those who come to the Lord's Table and those whom we serve in the world through intentional ministries of caring, kindness, compassion and respect. God nourishes us through Christ's holy meal that we may share God's holy message of love with all people. In the church, we celebrate Thanksgiving not only on this national holiday, but on the Lord's Day and every time we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving of our faith tradition.

As Christians we are commissioned at our baptism to share in the sacrament that was instituted by Jesus during his Last Supper with his disciples. Although in John's Gospel there is no narrative of Jesus instituting his eucharistic meal just prior to his crucifixion, the faithful have heard Jesus' Bread of Life discourse to inspire grateful fellowship and service as the living body of Christ in the church and the world. From generation to generation,

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 16:9-12

Christians have been inspired through Scripture and prayer to faithfully live out the Gospel message as they interpret the Holy Spirit to guide them.

We know from studying history and sharing family stories, that Christians have not always lived the Good News of Jesus Christ even when they believed they were speaking and acting in the Name of God. We only have to reflect on the traditions of today's national holiday to see how our ancestors went astray in thought, word, and deed. Within the past generation of believers, the history of our country and the history of the initial relationships between indigenous peoples and early settlers has been reexamined. Every year we reflect on the myth of the first harvest meal shared between the native Wampanoag people and the Pilgrims,<sup>3</sup> and reconsider the history related to the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, and we come closer to acknowledging the truth of past relationships and betrayals. We are coming to terms with how the church used Holy Scripture to justify the belief in Manifest Destiny, and only recently repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery.<sup>4</sup> In our own diocese, the Council for Native American Ministries is helping the church to repent of the evil it has done and the evil that was done on its behalf. We are learning more accurate histories and experiences of our native ancestors. We are working toward recognizing

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<sup>3</sup> <http://time.com/5457183/thanksgiving-native-american-holiday/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-d035](https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-d035)

native peoples as traditional custodians of lands where our churches, homes, and businesses now stand.<sup>5</sup> We are working toward forgiveness and reconciliation as we build relationships with Native peoples. Through our diocesan ministries and those in our local parishes, we are seeking to serve Christ in all persons, loving our Native neighbors as ourselves. We are seeking to be in true partnerships with indigenous peoples in ways that honor their traditions and rituals as being gifts from our One Creator God. We are seeking to gather at tables to share meals of thanksgiving in which all are respected for spiritual insights and practices which revere our relationships with God, each other, and all that God creates.

But reconciliation and relationships do not come easy, for the sins of our ancestors have been carried forward for many generations and are still perpetrated in our communities. As Christians, we promise to resist evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord – return to God; return to the way of love.<sup>6</sup> In resisting evil, we look to the teachings and experiences of Jesus Christ; how he was tempted in the wilderness just as he was about to begin his earthly ministry; how he was taunted by religious leaders and cynics, yet healed and blessed those who were forgotten, ignored, or marginalized; and how he forgave people that perhaps we would have a

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<sup>5</sup> Episcopal Diocese of Arizona Resolutions: 2019-4, 2019-1, 2016-3

<sup>6</sup> [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book\\_of\\_common\\_prayer.pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book_of_common_prayer.pdf), 304-305.

difficult time even to consider forgiving. But the way of love is all about forgiveness.

Yesterday, I went to see the new movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.” I thought it would be about the life Fred Rogers, and in some ways it was. We heard some of our favorite songs and reminisced about the puppets in the Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood of Make-Believe. But along side the feel-good aspects of these childhood memories, the movie focused on a topic that we continue to wrestle with in our lives as adults. More specifically the focus of the movie was on forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life – living into the teachings of Jesus whether or not we ever mention his name.

I loved watching Mister Rogers Neighborhood with my sisters and with my daughter. And I have a couple of his books and recordings. What he taught through children’s television still resonates with so many people today, because the world always needs more kindness, compassion, and respect. And the world needs more acts of forgiveness. In a 1999 interview, Fred Rogers reflected on a quote by one of his seminary professors as they discussed the topic of evil. His professor said, “The only thing evil can’t stand is forgiveness.”<sup>7</sup> “The only thing evil can’t stand is forgiveness.” Forgiveness of ourselves. Forgiveness of family members. Forgiveness of strangers.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/fred-rogers>

Forgiveness of ancestors. Forgiveness of our nation's founders. Forgiveness of our enemies.

As a people of faith, we seek to forgive and be forgiven as we reconcile those things we have done and left undone.<sup>8</sup> It is through forgiveness that we hope to live into the resurrected lives that Jesus promises. And for this we give thanks. Not just on Thanksgiving Day, but every day and every moment of our lives. Today, we observe Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday, and many of us will share a delicious meal with friends and family. But more importantly, we celebrate Thanksgiving Day as a major feast day in the church. We are celebrating by sharing a sacred meal, thanking God for all our gifts, especially the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life which Jesus Christ shares with us now and always.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book\\_of\\_common\\_prayer.pdf](https://episcopalchurch.org/files/book_of_common_prayer.pdf), 79.