



November 20, 2022

A Different Thanksgiving Story

As we enter a time of holidays and holy days, how do we reconcile a story of Thanksgiving that is false and harmful? What might we do to restore meaning to this time? What accountability does our faith call us to?

Reading - Des McGahern

Today's first reading is excerpted from Rev. Myke Johnson's essay, "Stolen Lands, Stolen Children," published in her book *Finding Our Way Home*:

Every October and November in the United States, we find ourselves in a season of false and misleading stories about European settlers and Native Americans. First there's the story that Columbus discovered America in 1492. Then there's the story about the Pilgrims and the Indians at the first Thanksgiving. It is astonishing, after all the work done by Native activists and their allies, that these stories keep returning unchanged year after year.

A Different Thanksgiving Story: Part 1 - Rev. Mary Gear

Like the Thanksgiving story that Sara shared earlier, I also was raised with the myth that the pilgrims and the Indians lived on the land in peace and shared the first thanksgiving meal filled with gratitude for the abundance of the land in this "new world."

In school we made pilgrim hats to wear and made turkeys by tracing our hand.

Did some of you make those, too? Maybe we make them still?

Mostly I remember looking forward to days off from school, a feast, and a big family gathering. Oh, and football on TV. My working-class family's Thanksgiving story was one of days away from paid work (some of us worked hard in the kitchen!) and enough for everyone to share. Thanksgiving was for gathering and abundance.

What was the story that you were told about Thanksgiving?

I agree with Sara that we need a new story, so I went looking for one. Here is a different story of that first Thanksgiving dinner.

That dinner took place in 1621, a year after the refugees from England landed in Plymouth Harbor on land inhabited by the Wampanoag people, who had lived on that land for centuries. The refugees were English puritans who disagreed with the church of England and who wanted the freedom to practice their religion. The Mayflower made shore after 65 rough days crossing the Atlantic Ocean, filled with seasick and malnourished people, and no doubt they were grateful for dry land. We know from the oral tradition of the Wampanoag that the first meeting was an exchange of bullets and arrows, which began a complicated relationship between Europeans and Indigenous people that continues to this day.

The puritans arrived in the Fall of 1620 ill prepared for winter and a land that was new to them. More than half of those who survived the ocean crossing didn't survive the first year. In order to make it through the winter, the puritans stole corn from the stores of the Wampanoag. But the Wampanoag had also suffered the loss of many in a plague that swept through their villages in the few years before the puritans arrived. They are also struggling to survive. In March of 1621, the puritans and the Wampanoag signed an agreement to help protect each other from hostile tribes in the area. It was a pact of mutual protection.

When the puritans and the Wampanoag shared a meal in the Fall of 1621, it was likely a feast to celebrate the harvest. Some say it was a way to trade information and to show force, to each other and to other tribes, more like a diplomatic mission. There was nothing special about that feast.

It was 250 years later, in 1863, that President Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday. The purpose of the holiday was to give thanks and try to heal the wounds of the Civil War. The story of the first Thanksgiving feast with the "settlers and the Indians" is a story created then and, in the years since, created for a variety of reasons, most of them about power and dominance.

That story of Thanksgiving, the one I just told, is a story that I learned as an adult. Some of what I will share next was new to me. That it was new says a lot about how pervasive the myth of Thanksgiving is and how embedded the underlying story is.

The puritans landing in Plymouth Harbor is a story that doesn't begin with them; it's part of a larger picture and a longer history. We can trace the story back to the landing of Christopher Columbus in the "new world" in 1492 as he

sought to find a direct path to China, Japan and the Spice Islands so their silks, spices and riches could be easily brought to the markets of Europe. When Columbus returned to Portugal and Spain with news of riches in the “new world” he declared that the land belonged to the kings of those countries.

His claiming was based on a declaration from the Pope in 1492 that said the King of Portugal had the right to conquer and enslave people who were Muslim or pagan, asserting that it was God’s plan for Christians to rule all lands. The Pope based his declaration on an interpretation of the biblical story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho, where God helped clear the land of Canaan for the Israelites; God helped them move into the promised land. That the Canaanites were already on that land was simply a barrier to be overcome with God’s help.

That papal declaration from 1492 is the basis of international law called the Doctrine of Discovery that exists to this day. The Doctrine of Discovery simply says that when a nation “discovers” land, it directly acquires the rights to that land. The Doctrine ignores the fact that land is often already inhabited by another nation or people. The Doctrine was used to legitimize the colonization of lands outside of Europe for centuries.

Essentially the Doctrine of Discovery asserts that it is God’s plan for Christians to claim ownership of native lands because indigenous people are not Christian, not civilized. Colonizers believed that God would help clear the “new world” for Christians to take, occupy, and make money from. They even saw the decimation of native people by disease as a sign of God’s work

After Columbus declared that the “new world” belonged to Spain and Portugal, England and France entered the picture adding that it wasn’t enough for emissaries of the king to plant flags on the land, it had to be occupied. The King of England didn’t want to pay for settlements in the new world, so gave charters to groups who wanted to settle there. The puritans who landed at Plymouth Harbor were one of those groups. They showed up on the land of the Wampanoag with the belief that they were on a mission from God to settle the new land and civilize the people there. And the puritans had the force of international law on their side.

At this point in the story, I was thinking that this was history and not relevant today. I was wrong.

The Doctrine showed up at the founding of America. When the colonies fought and won the war of independence from England in 1783, one of the first things the new government did was to declare the Doctrine of Discovery the law of the new nation in order to lay claim to the land that had been owned by the English king, land taken from the indigenous people.

The Doctrine was codified into US law in 1823 with the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Johnson v. M’Intosh*.

Rev. Myke Johnson, author of today's reading, writes:

Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that "Christian people" who had "discovered" the lands of "heathens" had assumed the right of "dominion," and thus had "diminished" the Indians' rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations. He claimed Indians had merely a right of occupancy in their lands. This decision has never been overturned and is still cited on a regular basis in Federal court.

The Doctrine of Discovery was most recently cited in a 2018 case brought by the Yakima Nation regarding the requirement that the tribe pay federal tax for tobacco grown on tribal land. The Yakima Nation lost the case.

Reading - Des McGahern

Our second reading is an excerpt from "Who Is Freedom For?" By David Schwartz.

We gather at Thanksgiving, in some sense, to retell the creation myth of our country. In this myth is our very best and our very worst: a boldness; a care for the common good; a wish to say *we* before *I*. Yet from even before the first Thanksgiving feast, it's a story of theft and violence, and a ruthlessly narrow definition of who "we" really means.

The colonists had come seeking freedom, and in that we identify with them. But it was freedom only for themselves. In every generation forward, from that day to this, the people living in this land that became America struggled always with the question: Who is freedom for?

A Different Thanksgiving Story: Part 2 - Rev. Mary Gear

If we wanted to understand the national identity of the United States, we might visit the US Capitol building. There we will find art, paintings and sculpture that depicts some of the stories of this country. Among the many pieces of art, there are eight paintings in the capitol rotunda; four were commissioned in the early 1800's and are scenes of the American revolution. The other four were commissioned in the mid-1800's, right before the Civil War, and are of earlier times. Here are three of them:

The pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock; I notice the open Bible and prayerful postures.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/embarkation-pilgrims>

Columbus' landing in the West Indies; I notice the flags with crosses and that the soldiers are armed and wary.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/landing-columbus>

The baptism of Pocahontas. This one speaks for itself.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/baptism-pocahontas>

These paintings capture and summarize the Doctrine of Discovery: that Europeans were sent by God to bring Christianity and civilization to the new world, and because they were sent by God, they had the right, even obligation, to use whatever means necessary to claim, occupy and use the land and other natural resources for their benefit.

The Doctrine of Discovery was the inspiration in the 1800s for the Monroe Doctrine, which declared U.S. dominance over the Western Hemisphere, and Manifest Destiny, which justified American expansion westward with the belief that the U.S. was destined to control all land from the Atlantic to the Pacific and beyond. The fourth in the series of paintings from the US Capitol rotunda that I shared shows the “discovery” of the Mississippi River by DeSoto.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a harmful story that has been told for centuries based on the interpretation of a religious sacred text. The Doctrine has been used to justify colonization over the centuries, in Africa, India, South America, Australia and New Zealand. In the US, it was used to take this land from the indigenous people who were already here, then later for the US colonization of Guam, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Alaska and Hawaii. Even though there is not much land in the world left to colonize now, indigenous people across the globe are demanding that the Doctrine of Discovery be repudiated and that its harmful effects be acknowledged.

Reputation and acknowledgement of the Doctrine of Discovery is important for faith traditions, and especially for those that are Christian or have Christian roots, like Unitarian Universalism. The Doctrine of Discovery is based on an interpretation of Christian sacred text that joined the church and the state for the purpose of power and accumulation of wealth. The Doctrine asserts that there is only one religion, and it is superior to all others. It asserts a dominant culture, supreme over all others, and that assertion lives on today. We must take the lead in telling a different story.

I am happy to say that, in 2012, the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution denying the validity of the Doctrine of Discovery and calling for full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In taking this action, UUs joined several other faith traditions: the World Council of Churches, the Episcopal church, United Church of Christ, the United Methodists, the Mennonites, and the Quakers.

There is much to be done to truly recognize indigenous rights in the US, and there are hopeful signs. In June 2021, Secretary Deb Haaland of the Department of Interior, announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. The first report of that investigation was released in May of this year outlining next steps for telling the truth about our history. We are following the work done in Canada to acknowledge the incredible damage done to First Peoples by the church and the state.

Last week the US House of Representatives held the first hearing to seat a representative from the Cherokee Nation, a seat that was promised in a treaty signed over 200 years ago, the treaty that led to the Trail of Tears. If approved, this representative will hold one of 436 seats in the House. Not nearly enough as we begin to have indigenous voices at the table.

In addition to supporting these and other efforts, what can we as a faith community do? We can learn different stories about our history, listening to the voices of indigenous people. We can tell the truth about what happened and tell complete stories. We can focus locally by learning about the land that we inhabit and the indigenous people who are still here on this land.

The stories that we tell about who we are and where we come from determine what we believe and how we act. Stories influence what laws we pass and how we enforce them. If our story is that white people of European descent are superior to native people and have a right to take their land, that makes it easier to say that people who are not American, immigrants, are a danger to our nation. It makes it easier to exploit both people and nature. It is important that we know and tell the true story, so we don't keep making the same mistakes.

In this month of exploring our spiritual theme of accountability, the Thanksgiving story we tell can be part of our spiritual work. We are accountable to our past and to our future. We are accountable to indigenous people, locally and globally. Hearing and telling the whole truth is part of the accountability process.

This week, I invite you to consider the story of Thanksgiving that you want to know and to tell. It is a holiday that was created out of division and war to promote healing as a nation. We need healing now more than ever.

Preparing this sermon, I learned a lot of new things about the myth of Thanksgiving, and perhaps you learned something new, too. I am telling this story today because I want to help create a holiday about gratitude that doesn't rely on colonization and exploitation. I want to help create a new story.

As we enter this week, I am grateful for the many indigenous people who, through the centuries, told a different story. I am grateful for the scholars, historians, activists and elders who tell the truth and keep the stories alive. I am

grateful for communities like this where we can hear and tell a different story. And, when we gather here at OUUC on Thursday for a Thanksgiving feast, I will be grateful for community and abundance.

What is the story you will tell this week?

Happy Thanksgiving.