

11-18-09 sermon Thanks for the Sacrifice, Food!

Genesis 1:29-31; Psalm 104:21-34
John 12:24-28

for the "Down to Earth" Traditional Thanksgiving Worship Service
9:30 p.m. Wednesday evening at Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA
Pastor Jim Beckwith, Annville Church of the Brethren, Annville, PA

At the time Alex asked me to speak at this traditional Thanksgiving worship service, I was reading each morning from the *Evangelischer Lebensbegleiter*, a book of daily devotions that a German friend gave me last year. The devotionals that particular week were invitations to celebrate Erntedankfest, the German Thanksgiving holiday. The October 2 entry was simple and straight-forward, with a reading from Psalm 104, which we read this evening, and two simple suggestions: (1) Take time to eat a meal slowly. Think about what you are eating and where it came from. (2) Take a fresh apple and simply feel its weight, notice its form, its color, the firmness of its skin.

How often do we pay attention to the food God has provided for us?

Now I must confess, I wondered a bit about why the German devotional focused on the harvest in October. During the three years I lived in Germany as a young adult, I was aware that Erntedankfest was a significant religious celebration, but I had forgotten that it took place on the first Sunday of October (technically: on the first Sunday after the full moon closest to the autumnal equinox – called the Harvest Moon). I'm so accustomed to American Thanksgiving coming in late November. I even googled the query: "Why is Erntedankfest celebrated so early?" If some of you are from farming families, you may laugh. The question should have been: "Why is American Thanksgiving celebrated so late in the year?" because the harvest of grains and fruits is well underway in early October. Perhaps – and this is merely my own personal surmising – perhaps the Germans celebrate at the end of the summer with their Erntekranzen (wreathes of grains from the harvest fields) to say "thank you" to God with the first fruits of the harvest, while Americans celebrate near the start of the winter, grateful for all that has been stored up from the harvest.

At any rate, the focus of both German and American Thanksgivings is on food. We give thanks that God provides us with food.

I was amazed how many times the word "food" shows up in scripture. It is a basic necessity, and people care about whether it is available to them. The very first chapter of the Bible describes how food was first provided by God. Did you notice

that it was a vegetarian diet? God declares (Genesis 1:29), *“I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground [that includes you and me] – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.”* How very appropriate that we should meditate this evening on bread made from the grains of the field. Green plants given to us for food.

Do you remember when the human diet changed? According to the Bible, I mean? You’ll find it at the start of Genesis 9:1-3 when God speaks to Noah and his sons after they have brought all the animals out of the ark. *“Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave the green plants, I now give you everything.”* The only restriction: do not eat meat that has its lifeblood in it.

Lifeblood is sacred. Jewish kosher laws of the Old Testament pay close attention to verify that blood has been removed from any food, precisely because of this command. Even though I know that the Seventh Day Adventist cousins in my extended family spend a lot of time on such details, I am no expert on this. I simply am increasingly aware that even without the lifeblood, there is still life-sustaining power in the food we eat ... and the plants and animals we eat make an awesome sacrifice. I invite us to pay more attention to that sacrifice and to give thanks that their life energies now become energy and strength for our living.

I don’t mean to be morbid with this. I know it can be really tough for 4-H kids to think about how the pigs and cows they have raised on the farm will become food. Perhaps some of you know what that is like. A few youngsters have told me they work really hard to not let the animals become pets. Some of us simply cannot bring ourselves to eat the legs or haunches of animals with which we have become friends. Even if you didn’t know the animal when it was alive, it can still make quite a difference to recognize the animal that will be eaten.

I performed a marriage for a Cambodian couple a few years ago. He had been a Buddhist monk until he decided to get married, so I carefully asked to be sure that we were celebrating a Christian marriage. And despite the fact that he spoke no

English, the translator was able to verify this. After the typical Brethren wedding ceremony, the organist and I were invited to the reception. When I arrived after closing up the church, Elizabeth (the organist) was sitting at a table wide-eyed as she invited me to sit down beside her. On the table was a small pig with its legs sticking up in the air, lying on its back, dead, but staring into our faces. “It’s for the sacrifice,” she whispered, “during the reception.” The Buddhist sacrifice to celebrate the Brethren marriage happened after we had left, but I had to ponder the change in appetite that occurs when your food is staring at you before you eat.

It’s just not something we like to think about. But the dynamics of it can be useful, especially in times when we are trying to save people from being killed. I am convinced that one of the most important ways of working for peace and justice is to get people to face each other, to begin to see each other as human beings instead of as stereotyped, faceless enemies. International exchange programs, short-term mission trips, even pen pal pairings are vital opportunities to begin to know and care about people so that we are less likely to want to kill them. It is the conflict resolution taught by Jesus in Matthew 18 – if someone has done you wrong, first go to them face-to-face and try to help them see their error; if unsuccessful, take along someone else to help you communicate with each other; and if that all doesn’t work, bring it before the church. The efforts keep both parties facing each other. But I digress – my point is that we don’t usually like to face our food before we eat it.

By having us put a face to our food, I don’t intend to make us squeamish. But I do want us to be clearly aware that the life of some of God’s creation is sacrificed in order to sustain life in the rest of us.

Vegetarians are not exempt from this reality. There is amazing God-given life in plants. They grow! They give up their full life cycle when we harvest them. And the life that was in them becomes life in us.

Jesus teaches that this is God’s plan. In John 12:24-28, he gives this analogy for how his sacrifice on the cross will be the source of blessing for others: *“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The person who loves his/her life will lose it, while the person who hates his/her life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* I take that to be a comparison between people who selfishly cling to everything in their lives versus those who are willing to surrender everything to God’s purposes for their lives.

Those who surrender will discover far deeper dimensions of life. *“The person who loves his/her life will lose it, while the person who hates his/her life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name!”*

The way of self-sacrifice is God’s purpose – for Jesus and for all who follow Jesus. It gives glory to God when our life energies are poured out for the sake of others.

So what are the sacrifices you must make? Allowing a roommate to do things differently from how you’ve always done them - that can be a sacrifice, especially if you didn’t have to share a room with someone else on an ongoing basis before. Perhaps it is a sacrifice for you to give up a night out in order to study. Or perhaps you have decided to give your spring break time to take part in a disaster relief project – now that might be a fun sacrifice! Self-chosen sacrifices are usually more fun. Some sacrifices are not self-chosen, e.g. studying late into the night to meet the requirements of a professor. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances require us to sacrifice the career of our dreams. Sometimes the behavior of our friends has to be confronted and we risk alienating them. Sacrifices abound, when lives are growing.

I watch as my daughters sacrifice their nights of sleep, time and again, to care for their infant and toddler children, and I hesitate to tell them that they will sacrifice for years to come as they help these little ones through adolescence and adulthood. Perhaps they know that already, as they watch my 83-year-old parents continue to bear the stress and strain of caring about their grown children as we make our way through all the misadventures of life.

It is a basic part of God’s creation that life be nurtured, fed, made possible by the giving of life energies from one to another. And what a blessing to be able to see students, friends, children, even our parents, and others we care for ... blossom and grow in spirit and in energetic living, as a result of our investment in them, our love for them through thick and thin, the sacrifice of our life energies to help them live.

So give thanks for all who have sacrificed something of themselves for you.

Let your daily food be a symbol for that sacrifice. It is no accident that Jesus took the bread at the Last Supper and gave it to his disciples as a way of visualizing how he would give his body on the cross as a sacrifice. Whenever we eat bread of any sort, it is not a mere symbol – it is the actual reality that a life which God created – the life of the grain that was crushed to make bread – has given up its life form in order to become the energy for life in us. Amazing wonderful gift to us! I invite you to give thanks.

Take time to give thanks for all the plants and animals that God gives to you for food. Give thanks for their sacrifice. Honor the life that was in them by the way in which you use that energy. Use it to give energy and strength to others, feeding them in spirit as well as in body by the loving care, encouragement and hope you provide.

That's what I want you to leave with tonight – the awareness that there is life in you as the gift of God, a gift that is sustained because of the sacrifice of many life forms to provide food so that you might live. Do not regret their sacrifice. Honor their sacrifice by the ways in which you live. Do not live for yourself. Live by the same bold desire to use the energies of your life to help others live fully and well.

And may the Lord of the Harvest, the God who gives Life through sacrifice, bless and strengthen you with great joy in being a part of that Life-giving process on earth. May the powerful Bread of Life, Jesus himself, bring forth his Way of Life in you, the Life of self-sacrifice that grows and matures into eternal Life. Amen.

Hymn *Now Thank We All Our God* 102