

“Thanks for Joy and Thanks for Tears” (SHZ 351)

Thanksgiving is an official government holiday in both Canada and the U.S. with a variety of underpinnings, traditions, and meanings. For some, it's a work-free day to prepare for Black Friday shopping deals or to focus on a football game, with or without a turkey dinner. For others, the tradition of “everyone coming home” for a home-cooked feast is the main event. In our mostly non-agrarian society, where food is ever-abundant at the grocery store, the post-harvest gathering to give thanks to the Creator is ever less-connected to crop results. In times past, feast and famine tumbled around each other in tandem, and post-harvest rituals were especially centered on food and its gathered abundance before the non-growing season took grip upon the land.

Giving Thanks to God

Nevertheless, we can celebrate Thanksgiving in many joyous and uplifting ways, gathered with loved ones around tables laden with good food. We may consciously pause to itemize and even share all we have to be thankful for. Our blessings may filter through our mind as we sing from the “Thanksgiving and Praise” section of our hymnal. We may find much joy in this day set aside for rest and thanksgiving, in spite of a current sorrow or trial we carry. I've asked a few of my siblings for thoughts, as they have been incorporated into new Thanksgiving families, as well as some insight from my own children on our own special family gathering in 2015 which was abundant with “thanks for joy and thanks for tears.”

As the Canadian Thanksgiving happens sooner in the harvest calendar than the American, perhaps due to the earlier harvest dates, I asked my brother Ryan, currently living in Saskatoon, for some thoughts on his new Thanksgiving family traditions. He slipped the reporter's pen over to his father-in-law Duane Pirness, grandfather to Ryan and Anniina's three children: Arian, Sonnet, and new baby Ismay who will join the Pirness celebration this year.

A Special Time for Family

“Our Thanksgiving meal has always been a special time for our family,” Duane says. “Canadian Thanksgiving occurs on the second Monday in October, so each year we celebrate it with a turkey meal. Some years it has worked better to have the meal on Sunday; other times we've had it on Monday. Mirjami is Finnish, so the tradition was a new one for her, but she immediately embraced it as a special family event. When the children were small, it was a day that they enjoyed and looked forward to; usually their Aunt Myla came to share the meal with us.”

Time doesn't stand still for any of us, and now Duane and Mirjami have entered a new phase of Thanksgiving celebrations: “With two sons-in-law, and grandchildren, it has become even more special, when it's possible for all of us to be together. When the children were little, they were excited over the special meal. Now it has become a time for visiting and playing games, with everyone enjoying the little ones. Other than the fellowship, nothing has been specially planned, although sometimes everyone shares what they are especially thankful for.”

Duane shares a mutual and heartfelt hope: “that our celebration on Thanksgiving Day will help us remember to be thankful every day for all the gifts and blessings God gives to our family.”

Celebrations Change with Circumstances

Just as far away from my household is my sister Heather, who lives in Kalispell, Montana with her husband Conor and nine children. While extended families make reliable Thanksgiving guests, this family has had to forge new traditions:

“The first couple of years in Montana, we were able to host a Thanksgiving feast at our trailer with all of the other Montana folk. Everyone brought a part of the meal, and we sang Thanksgiving songs.” Sometimes, they were able to host online services as part of their Thanksgiving gathering.

Again, change is re-shaping their holidays, as their family grows and more believing families settle around them, too many for one household table. Heather feels blessed to have hosted long-distance company for the last three years of turkey dinners, followed by restorative fellowship, singing, and outdoor activities.

Blending Traditions, Thanking Together

Even farther to the west from me lives my sister Katie with her family. Like Duane, Katie is married to an immigrant who has different childhood experiences surrounding a Thanksgiving feast. Her husband Ignace hails from Togo in West Africa, where he didn’t celebrate any harvest festival growing up, but enjoyed many other types of family gatherings, with special meals, beverages, and traditions. Since he works as a nurse in the Seattle area, he sometimes has had to work over the Thanksgiving holiday.

When possible, Katie, Ignace, and their children, including Fiam who will taste his first bite of Thanksgiving this year, have gathered with extended family for Thanksgiving dinner, as Katie explains: “We have enjoyed taking the whole day to visit, eat, play outdoors, and just be together. When Ignace is part of our Thanksgiving celebration, we bring an African dish for the table, such as tapioca porridge or plantains. Thanksgiving is celebrated with lunch and dessert, and when the men and young boys have done the dishes, the mood shifts to Christmas. Names are exchanged and the children visit excitedly about the upcoming season. Our little family too looks forward to Christmas, another festive time to spend, in part, with my dad’s Seattle family, who are special people in our lives.”

Katie reflects on the tradition of setting aside a day for Thanksgiving, that “while it’s easy, even natural, to focus on blessings of abundance, (surplus food and material goods for example), we pause to give thanks for the numerous blessings we’ve received.”

The Heavenly Thanksgiving

Lastly, I want to share my family’s Thanksgiving experiences of last year, which my 12-year-old daughter Livie describes: “Last Thanksgiving is one I will remember all my life. My grandma (Naemi) was very sick with cancer and we knew it was going to be her last Thanksgiving with us. She came on a hospital bed. Once everyone had eaten, we stood around her bed and sang her favorite songs. I am thankful she got to be there. At past Thanksgivings, she was always the last one to eat because she was on her feet, making sure we all were fed.”

It certainly was a time of joy and tears, to gather, eat and sing, knowing our dear Naemi awaited her eternal rest after a busy and productive life of serving her family. She passed away on the last day of 2015, to join that heavenly Thanksgiving feast.

We will make our Thanksgiving plans this year, with special memories of years gone by, with joy welcoming new attendees, be they babies or new additions by marriage or friendship, and with thankfulness in our hearts for so much, “Thank you, Lord, for all your blessings!”

Janelle Huhta

Discussion Points:

1. How is Thanksgiving currently celebrated in your home/family?
2. What kinds of food do you eat? Do you think about how they got to your table?
3. What non-food traditions do you enjoy at Thanksgiving time?
4. Can you think of a time when you have personally experienced famine? If not famine, a trial so heavy that you have had difficulty giving thanks to God? What has helped you?