

“Thanksgiving reflections: 2007”
Luke 20:27-38

First Menno
18 Nov ‘07

Thanksgiving traditions here in the States stretch back several centuries ... with some renditions no doubt reflecting more accurately than others what actually happened on that so-called first Thanksgiving. Here in this congregation too we have a shorter tradition that goes back I’m not sure how long that identifies the Sunday before the Thanksgiving holiday as our church Thanksgiving service, often followed by some kind of a meal ... even as we are having today. Though as some often playfully tease ... the spread will likely not be up to what our grandmothers laid out for us ... but it will be ample.

Those of us who gather here each Sunday morning also bring memories and earlier experiences of what does or should go on Thanksgiving Day. Likely these include family dinners, lots of relatives and way too much food. And for some of us ... many hours and miles of travel ... by air or car ... to get back “home,” wherever that was or is.

In 2007, we at First Menno likely still embrace parts of these various traditions of Thanksgiving past, but the relative new twist that impinges upon at least some of us is that incredible Friday after Thanksgiving ... the shopping day of the year for merchants and perhaps for a significant number of you. One of the ways I protest that day is by inviting and hosting a Wilson family dinner that day at our house ... which is kind of my not so subtle way of providing an alternative to that frenzy. But you need to understand I really do not like shopping ... anytime of the year.

You might also have noticed thus far in this sermon, I’ve not yet mentioned the most important Realty behind all of these Thanksgiving traditions. Of course I’m referring to God.

God is the One who most often gets short-changed in our world today ... even as we count our many blessings and even name them one by one. So, today's Worship Service is so very important ... also a counter-cultural act, if you will. But so is every Sunday we gather ... as we remind each other about the important Realty and realities in our lives: whether we have lots or less, whether we're healthy or not, whether we're currently happy with our lives or not. We're here to say, "It's not all about us and what we have or don't have. We are here to offer praise and thanks to God, no matter what ... and hopefully with a thankful heart." Though I surely acknowledge some years are easier to do that than others.

This morning's text from Luke may seem like a strange Thanksgiving scripture because it contains one of those famous "what if" kinds of questions addressed to Jesus. These particular Sadducees did not want to learn more about the content of Jesus' teaching for their growth and understanding, but rather to show the crowd that this popular rabbi was not nearly as clever or knowledgeable as everyone thought.

Luke points out in verse 27 the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. In Acts 23:8 he reiterates this by noting that they said there was no resurrection, angel or spirit ... in contrast to the Pharisees who believed in all three.

Luke too seemingly believes in all three, but the text in Luke 20 is not really a definitive argument for the resurrection or even about the helpfulness of the ancient tradition of levirate marriage as found in Deuteronomy 25. The levirate marriage was assumed in that culture and time; a teaching that said if a man should die without a son (by which his name and family lineage might be passed on), his brothers were more or less obligated to see to it that such a thing would not happen. So one of the brothers would take his dead brother's widow as one of his own wives so that the first male child born from that union could carry the dead brother's name. We'll not discuss the pros and cons of that ancient practice at this time.

But the “what if” little riddle these particular Sadducees asked Jesus to solve had nothing to do with the stated riddle. Their question seemingly was aimed in another direction ... to discredit Jesus. Often times, over the years Mennonites have also had “what if” questions directed to us regarding our peace position ... the “what would you do if” kind of question. And most often those questions too are not meant to be a way to learn and discuss a complex moral issue, but rather to ridicule and show how stupid one would be to believe such an impractical thing in our kind of world ... Jesus notwithstanding.

Questions are generally good things ... doubt too can serve wonderful purposes ... but when these are used as weapons to destroy, they lose their potential for good and growth. Jesus more or less sidesteps their clever little riddle ... pointing out that what is important in this age or life has little or no relevance in the age to come.

Pulling from the only scriptural authority the Sadducees acknowledged, namely the first five books of Moses or Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), Jesus highlights the burning bush story to make his point. God is the God of the living, and it matters not which side of the line one is on in historical or temporal time ... with God, those from the past and those alive today are all seen as alive.

In our day, even here, we too hear and have arguments about Jesus’ resurrection. Was it physical or spiritual? What kind of a body did he have after his death or did he even have one? And behind that is often our wondering about our own beliefs about Jesus and yes about our own lives after death ... or of our friends or family members who are deceased. Sometimes this includes our wondering about those millions of people who do not acknowledge Jesus at all. Most of these matters are faith questions and can’t be proved in a lab or all that logically ... though some of us believe there are other avenues to get at the truths of our faith ... outside of the criteria of scientific

verification and even outside of our contemporary grid of what we think possible.

On Thursday morning I was reading an article in that great little magazine **Weavings** entitled “Vigils and the Rest” by Mark Burrows. Mark’s article was a reflection on his weeklong stay at the Abbey of Gethsemane in KY ... which is most famous for its connection to Thomas Merton. And since I too had spent a week there on retreat several years ago (as has Gordon Oyer on other occasions) I found this article particularly graphic and powerful. Here are a couple of paragraphs from that article that connect beautifully with Luke 20 and Jesus’ teaching about God and I quote ...

The woods surrounding the abbey, stretching up to the knobs and into the hollows of this sparsely settled part of central Kentucky, are otherwise silent. The soft blue moonlight casts long shadows across the monastery lawn from the old sycamore trees, their arms reaching up from the embankment, their hands reaching the rows of small, indistinguishable white crosses that populate the monastic graveyard. They form an unmoving community that still keeps its vigil around the altar, separated from the living only by the thin tissue of death and a wall of stone and glass. Does their song continue to shape itself in the night? Are their voices now mingling in a different choir than they had in the wooden stalls within the abbey church? Is the familiar sound of chant, a muffled murmur from the choir stalls within, a familiar remembrance for them? The angels, as Rilke once wrote, “don’t know if they wander among the living or the dead.” Perhaps it is no different for those buried ones, the separation of stone and earth marking less the inertia of a boundary than the energy of transition.

Rilke put it this way: “the living ever err in distinguishing things too sharply,” he wrote, for “... the eternal flow flows through both realms, and in all ages, always, and resounds through them all.”

That sounds strangely like what Jesus told the Sadducees and what Luke was telling the early church ... and what I'm reminding you of this Thanksgiving Worship Service.

Both the rhythms of our ordinary lives outside the walls and the rhythms of psalms chanted 7 different times of the day and night every day of the year by monks within the monastic walls can serve as reminders that everything is somehow about and connected to God. Each of us seems to have this built in need or longing to connect with the Holy One beyond us ... the One who self-identifies in Exodus 3 as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob ... the God of persons past and those alive in Jesus' day ... and in our day. This is the same God whom we gather before even this day to give thanks, knowing that no other relationship or connection is more foundational or important. Knowing that all of the other profound and significant relationships we relish and value so highly only serve as hints of what we're really longing for ... our Creator and Lover, God of the living and the dead ... God not bound by the boundaries of time and space. And so can leave the "what if" questions which we have no final answers to anyway ... and live our lives in faith, following Jesus ... inviting his Spirit to both guide and join ours, believing that ultimately everything and everyone is invited to bring praise to God and by extension extend just a bit further God's dream and intention for all of creation and whatever is beyond that.

Without God and our giving of thanks, there is no Thanksgiving worth the effort. We must be counter-cultural enough to believe that God is what makes or breaks everything we are or have. The challenge then is how to so live our lives for whatever time we're allotted on this planet so that we better reflect the One we worship.