

Thanksgiving Reflections:
Joy, Gratitude, and Acknowledgment

Bishop Connie Mitchell Shelton



This Thanksgiving season, I'm drawn to the Psalms, Psalm 100 in particular. It's a psalm I learned as a child.

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before God's presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord, He is God. It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves."

Now, that's got a lot of that old English language, so now I wanna read that particular part from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"On your feet now. Applaud God.
Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into God's presence.
Know this: God is God, and God? God.
God made us. We didn't make God.
We're God's people, God's well-tended sheep."

Pretty sobering. God is God. Let's tell the truth about how God sees God's world.

As our daughters get older, they're now 27 and 22, we find ourselves sharing family stories... more transparently. When they were younger, we would share "age-appropriate" narratives of what unraveled in parts of our extended families. Now that they are older, we don't sugarcoat the stories anymore. We honestly share the stories of addiction or divorce. We open up about the betrayals and the missteps because we believe it's important to peel back the stories that form us. The stories that form our families, our nation, and the church.

This week of Thanksgiving, congregations across the United States sing the traditional hymn, "We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing. God chastens and hastens his will to make known. The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing. Sing praises to his name, he forgets not his own."

God forgets not God's own. And as the church, it's important that we not forget...the inaccuracies of the old, old story that's been told about Thanksgiving. Pilgrims and Native people, sitting down to share a meal. That's not the whole story. Generous Indigenous people were exploited and robbed of their lives and their land. When we read history, it's imperative that we pay attention to who's telling the story. Whose voices are missing? Whose lives and cultures were decimated? We are old enough to be transparent. No need to sugarcoat the Thanksgiving story.

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It matters that we remember. It matters that we are seeing the future in the present. Generous people are still being exploited and robbed of their lives. Don't turn a blind eye.

God is generous. God's generosity is for all people. The church is an expression of the love and generosity of God. We are disciples of Jesus. God doesn't give a flip about our party politics. God cares about God's children... indigenous to this land and from all over God's world.

Friends, we must remember the Indigenous people at whose expense this whole story of Thanksgiving sits. In the North Carolina Conference, we celebrate our 13 Native American clergy who lead with strength and love. The Committee on Native American Ministries is a beacon of leadership, advocacy, and service, embodying Christ's call to love and uplift one another as they recently traveled to Washington, DC, to hear the stories of the ancestors.

This past summer, our Native American United Methodist churches hosted an expanded Literacy Program across several churches in partnership with The Duke Endowment, supporting children with vital reading skills. Our Native American pastors and congregations feed elders and children, support people who are homeless, work for justice, and raise awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women. The exploitation and violence against Native Americans and people with brown skin continues.

I'm also very aware that some of you right now are experiencing the pain and loss that comes as the holidays approach - loss of relationships through death or loss of relationships because of brokenness. Take care of yourselves. Take care of others. God is near. God forgets not God's own. And that includes you. God remembers. God sees. God knows. Blessed Thanksgiving to you, North Carolina United Methodists.