

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Making peace with Thanksgiving: A holiday message

Editor's note: This message was delivered by the speaker at the 2014 Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration at Grand Rapids' Westminster Presbyterian Church on Monday.

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As a child, I felt suspicious of the Pilgrims. There was something fundamentally unfair about strangers arriving in a new land and taking it away from the people who lived there first. A teacher's, "Well, we're here now, so don't worry about it," only confirmed I was on to something.

As much as I liked the day with my family, I knew families who

wouldn't be together because of the war. When we got back to school, I could tell from their silence when the rest of us compared pie counts and turkey sizes, I had friends who couldn't have the feast my family enjoyed. Growing up taught me a new word for my uneasiness: privilege. It didn't help. Nor did it help to discover the only truth in the first Thanksgiving story was that there were Pilgrims, there were Indians and there was a celebration. I needed to make peace with Thanksgiving.

When the Puritan Separatist congregation from Scrooby, England, left for the Netherlands, and traveled to the region now known as New England, they were unprepared to endure the



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winter of 1620 aboard their ship anchored in Provincetown Harbor. By harvest 1621, half of the passengers had died, including 14 of the 18

married women. Of the 53 passengers remaining nearly half were children and teens, and the rest mostly were widowers under the age of 40. That anyone survived was because of the intervention of the Wampanoag people, specifically a member of the Patuxet band named Tisquantum, also called Squanto, who taught the newcomers how to cultivate varieties of corn, squash and beans, catch fish and

collect seafood.

The real story of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag people is a story about the human quest for well-being, and how far people are willing to go to secure the welfare of others. Christians have a word for that. The word is peace.

I finally have made peace with Thanksgiving. No more trying to force a secular peg into a religious hole. My faith teaches me to say I am sorry for things, even when my ancestors did them, especially if it leads to reconciliation with others. My faith, like that of the Pilgrims, teaches me gratitude is not a holiday to be celebrated but a discipline to be practiced each day, at all times, in every circumstance.

Most importantly, my saying thank you isn't nearly as important as the thanks that someone else will offer to God because I have used my life to attend to, advocate for, and in any way I can, supply them with a greater sense of well-being. Jesus called that peacemaking.

Thanksgiving gives us the opportunity to celebrate. But our more basic need is for peace and peacemaking, a sense of personal well-being and a deep commitment to providing for our common good. However we observe Thanksgiving, this year, let us each do something, anything, that will result in others expressing gratitude to their source of blessing and good fortune.

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