

The great Thanksgiving

By [David Henson](#)

November 23, 2010

I love feasts.

Not so much the eating part, but the preparing part. For the past three years, since becoming a stay-at-home dad, I have done most of the cooking, especially around the holidays, planning, preparing, and cooking festive feasts. Some years we experimented with new rubs for the turkey or nontraditional side dishes. By now, our family has its own traditional dishes, without which the table would seem bare: garlicky kale with dried cranberries, or swiss chard with golden raisins and pine nuts; mashed potatoes, always a different way each year; green bean casserole (nothing from a can); fresh orange-cranberry relish; mulled apple cider; glazed cornish hens instead of a full turkey; and a pumpkin-bourbon cheesecake to complete the meal.

And wine and bread.

When I think about the meal, and shop for the ingredients, I get a rush of nostalgic emotion and envision all the past year's perfect feasts, forgetting of course the reality of it. It's difficult work. I sweat a lot. I swear a lot, especially when the turkey hasn't thawed or is obstinate in cooking. I get a little stressed when my timing is a little haywire, if the mashed potatoes require a microwave warm-up before serving. I always long for a second oven. But, when I arrange the hens on the serving platter, glistening with the tart raspberry balsamic glaze, and set them in the center of the table, and I see the eyes of my family and friends widen in excitement, in hunger, in expectation, in anticipation, I feel, deep within me, fed by something greater than food. When we pass the bread, pour the wine and toast, I see a feast, and echoes of a feast that has little to do with food.

In these moments, Thanksgiving becomes something more like the Great Thanksgiving, or in Greek, the Eucharist.

I am sure there will be someone who complains about this holiday being one in which Americans overindulge in food and eat in excess, as they are wont to do. And I suppose there might be a valid criticism in that. There will be someone who calls us to remember that many, many people will be hungry on the day of feasts. There will be someone who reminds us that this day of thanksgiving has a shadow of the slaughter of Native Americans. And they should, because we should remember these things, and hold that tension of sorrow with our elation of thanksgiving.

The same can be said of the Great Thanksgiving, that as Christians we can overindulge in our own ritual and faith. That there are many, many people who hunger for this feast but are turned away, and that there are many, many people who simply hunger. That this Great Thanksgiving has been used as a battering ram, a bargaining chip and a bloody battle cry. And we should be remind of these things so that when we dip a wafer into wine, the blood of Christ mixes with the blood of martyrs and heretics who were all executed for their beliefs, the emaciated wafer reminds us of those who have been denied what we take for granted.

But Thanksgiving is also a day in which Americans remember to be thankful, and this is no small feat in a culture in which everything is not enough, in which the day after being so thankful we slam ourselves into malls and forget what it means to be thankful. The Great Thanksgiving is a moment in which Christians are reminded to be thankful, and that is no small feat in a religious culture that pops peppermint gum to erase the taste of wine in the morning and waits impatiently for restaurant doors to open for lunch.

But many progressive Christians fear being thankful for what they have because it has echoes of the prosperity gospel in which God's favored find wealth in spite of what the Gospels actually say. So, many of us go around moping on Thanksgiving, conflicted about whether we should thank God for our blessings or pound our chests because we have so much. We slake our guilt with one-time offerings to food pantries and homeless

shelters, or we rail at the dinner table about politics and religion, or we eat our turkey but promise to have indigestion later for embracing such bad karma.

But, I wonder what would happen if we let ourselves be genuinely thankful on Thanksgiving, thankful for the turkey that dried out, the cornish hens that burned, the lumps in the mashed potatoes, the spilled wine on the floor, the heated argument, smoke alarm that erupts and wakes up a toddler, the passing of bread over strained relationships, the extra glass of wine, the stack of dishes to do in the sink, that we ate too much while others ate too little, thankful for all that we have and the eye of the needle standing between us and heaven. The reality of the feast is that being thankful in the midst of it can be difficult, because in the feast, in the coming together at the table, we are made human and messy, as wine dribbles on chins, gravy spills on the floor, the body of Christ broken and stained red. Before it, after it and in the idea of it, thankfulness is simple. In the midst of it, the setting of the table, the breaking of the bread, the sipping of wine, the Thanksgiving can be difficult. It is always the same, more or less, and always so different, more or less, and always so mundane, and, if we pay attention, so sublime.

And, if all else fails, pour another glass of wine. It is a feast, after all, and the wine should never be wasted.

Originally posted at [Unorthodoxy](#).