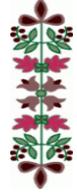


We Raise Our Thanksgiving An Indigenous Thanksgiving Communion Service



Introduction

Our brother Jesus asked only one thing of those who professed to follow him: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34–35)

What does it mean, in practical terms, to love one another just as Jesus first loved us? Surely one aspect must mean to serve one another, and we witness an example of that in Jesus washing the feet of his friends and serving them at the feast that we celebrate with communion.

In First Nations communities, we recognize that there is a manner of distributing communion that honours that tradition of serving one another. If it is unfamiliar it may seem strange at first; however, the Spirit will soon become evident to you. Let us all form a large circle here around the periphery of our sanctuary. The circle will stretch as far as necessary to include everyone of all ages, denominations, gender, race, and orientation, but close enough that we’re shoulder to shoulder.

When the time comes to share communion, we will first start the loaf of bread passing around the circle, and I’d like each person to offer the bread to the person beside them with the words: “The bread of salvation offered to you.” Since this is a feast, take a good substantial piece from the loaf when it is offered, and then take the loaf to serve the next person.

We’ll next pass the cup, and each person will offer it to the person beside them with the words: “The cup of forgiveness offered to you.” Please dip your piece of bread in the cup and eat, before you take the cup and offer it to the next person in the same manner.

Sharing in Communion

(Responsive prayer based on Deuteronomy 26:1–11)

May Creator be present with you.

And also with you.

Let us lift up your hearts

We lift them up to Creator.

Let us truly give thanks to Creator our God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Take notice of the people who are familiar and those who are new to you, and take a few moments to move about greeting each other with “The peace of Christ be with you.”

(Pause)

Let’s come together before our Creator God in prayer:

Blessed are you, Gracious God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Like the ancient Hebrew people of the scriptures, we too come before you on this Thanksgiving morning and make our declaration:

I declare today to the Creator my God, that we have come to the land the Creator swore to our ancestors to give us.

As the ancient Hebrews were led to a Promised Land, our ancestors were also wandering people. Tracking the trails of the animals they hunted and venturing to the places where the plants and herbs grew, they in fact followed the path you, O Creator, set for them.

And when they paused in their journeys they raised their thanksgiving to you, O Creator.

Millennia ago their wanderings led our ancestors across the ice bridge you caused to be formed over the northern sea. It was a hard and long journey, frequently encountering dangers they could never have anticipated. Our ancestors had no way of knowing where their journey would end, yet they trusted to follow bravely wherever Creator led them.

And in most frightening moments, they paused, offered their seema (medicinal tobacco), and raised their thanksgiving to you, O Creator.

For 40 times 40 years, they wandered ever southward, encountering massive forests, crystal clear lakes, bountiful game, and a land that readily provided the plants and herbs required to sustain life. The essence of the ancient teachings became apparent to them, for the Creator had truly brought them out to this land “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders.”

And in this wondrous realization, they paused, offered their seema, and raised their thanksgiving to you, O Creator.

Our ancestors said to themselves: We were brought to this place and given this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore now we bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O Creator, have given us. And so it was that at harvest time each year, when every tribe and nation recognized that they had set aside enough to bring them through the long, cold, months of winter, our ancestors gave us the teachings of thanksgiving.

We were brought to this place and given this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore now we bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O Creator, have given us.

In time the others came—travelling on great wooden sailing ships from Europe and elsewhere in the world—but seeking also a Promised Land. They knew little of the rigours of this new land they had come to, and they would surely have perished had not our ancestors shared their teachings with these strangers. But when they had brought in their first harvest, our ancestors also taught them: Place your basket before the Creator your God and bow down, and you and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Creator your God has given to you and your household.

And so our ancestors, along with those who had been aliens to this Promised Land, rejoiced in all the good things that you, O Creator our God, had given to them and their households.

Those who came also brought new ways with them—some of which were of great assistance to our ancestors, but some of which worked much harm to the Anishinaabek. Through the teachings of Jesus the Christ we received yet another vision of you, O Creator, and came to appreciate that your message of love and compassion embraced all of humanity. Yet, even those teachings came at great cost to our people, as frequently very little love and compassion was shown while the Anishinaabek gradually found themselves dispossessed and treated as aliens in their own land. From every tribe and every nation the sounds of lamentation were heard.

But even in their sorrow, our ancestors never lost faith in you, O Creator, and they still paused, offered their seema, to raise their thanksgiving.

There followed many hard decades—years when the Anishinaabek were despised and ridiculed, the teachings dismissed and outlawed as evil superstition. First Nations were reduced to beggars, dependent upon the cold charity of institutions. Even the churches that first brought the liberating message of Jesus, through misguided notions of moral self-righteousness, endeavoured to assimilate and eliminate the proud heritage of our people.

Our ancestors were given bowls of shame to drink, and were fed upon the bread of unworthiness. Many lives were crushed and families destroyed under the intoxicating corruption of alcohol and drugs—far too many of our kin spiritually broken by the vicious cruelty of prison.

Yet a core of faith remained strong within some, and still they pause to raise their thanksgiving to you, O Creator, for what remained.

But you, O Creator, never forgot your Original Peoples, and though the years of trial and testing were hard and many were broken, there arose a new and stronger spiritual flame within your Anishinaabek. Even as the ancient Hebrews were moulded into a new nation by their years of harsh servitude, so too has the crucible of the last 150 years forged our people into a culture justifiably proud of its heritage and traditions.

We come before you now, humbled by the magnitude of the sacrifices our forebears made for our survival, compassionate to the festering wounds that still remain, and determined that all of this suffering shall not have been in vain.

It is with a new and flourishing sense of pride that we recognize ourselves as Anishinaabek, O Creator, and like those who have gone before us we now pause and raise our thanksgiving to you.

At Thanksgiving we remember your constant love and concern for all who have made their home in Canada, and we are truly thankful for all that we have received. We consider our families and friends, and we think lovingly of our homes.

At these times we are drawn closer to those we love and who in turn love us. All that we have represents the certainty of your faithfulness to us as your people, and moves us to sincerely repeat the words of the ancient hymn of praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed indeed, is the one who came in your name, and gave to us the tradition of fellowship through the “sinner’s meal of forgiveness.” Gathered together here we now prepare to continue that tradition of fellowship, and so, of course, we remember:

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We remember that on the very evening before he died, Jesus called all of his friends together for a meal. He tended to their every need, provided for their comfort, and served each one of them.

Partway through the meal he picked up a loaf of bread (*ELEVATE BREAD*), and having thanked you for it just as we have done, he broke the bread and passed it around to everyone present. Even knowing that Judas would soon betray him, even still, Jesus served the bread to him as well. And it was then that he said to them: “Take this, all of you, and eat it! This is my body, given for you. Each time you do this, remember me.”

And we also remember that some little while later, Jesus then picked up a cup that was on the table (*ELEVATE CUP*), and once again he thanked you. He passed it around then to all of his friends, and he said: “This cup is the new promise God has made with you in my blood! Each time you do this, and drink from this cup, remember me.”

And remember we do! We remember his death and celebrate his resurrection, for we wait with hope for his coming again, to bring peace and justice to the earth.

(together:) **Come, our brother Jesus, Come! Send your Holy Spirit upon us and what we do here, that we and these gifts, having been touched by your Spirit, may become signs of life and love to each other, and to all the world.**

Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory be yours, now and for evermore.

The bread which we break (*FRACTION BREAD*) is the communion of the body of Christ. Take this, all of you, and eat it!

The drink which we pour (*POUR DRINK*) is the communion of the blood of Christ. Take this, all of you, and drink it!

The gifts of God, for the people of God. A “sinner’s banquet” is prepared for all who are not too proud to confess that they have sinned, and who are willing to humbly seek forgiveness through the redeeming name of Jesus Christ. All are welcome at this table, for Christ makes no distinction between young and old, rich and poor, man or woman, or between one denomination and another. Come, and join in Christ’s meal.

(As described in the introduction above, all who are present are invited to receive the bread, dip it in the cup, and partake of Christ’s forgiveness.)

Post-Communion Prayer

(Responsive Prayer)

For the bread we have eaten, for the drink we have tasted, for the pardon we have received through the sharing of our brother Jesus’ supper, we thank you, Creator.

Grant that what we have done, and what we have been given here, may so mark our hearts that we will continue to grow in Christ. May we, the Indigenous ones, reach out in kinship to all those of every culture, and share the grace of genuine thanksgiving. Thus, may ours truly be a faith that issues in action. Amen.

—Matthew Stevens is an ordained United Church minister of Kanien'kehá:ka Haudenosaunee (Mohawk) and Irish Métis heritage, who has been recognized as an Elder within the Anishinaabek, and has served both First Nations and dominant society congregations.