

AN HONORABLE HARVEST

November 2019

They came to the Altar; young and old, as families and friends, children in arms, people of every description - each bringing a gift of food as the congregation sang, "Come Ye Thankful People, Come." It was a sight to behold! There was energy and joy in the procession as the Chancel was filled with the people's generosity. It was Thanksgiving Sunday. By Monday the gifts were at the local Food Pantry. By Thursday they were in the homes of people who needed it most.

The sharing of food, whether around a table with family and friends, or as a gift to people in need, is a powerful witness to our common humanity, and it is a response to the invitation share so that all may have enough from the bounty of the land.

Increasingly, at least in this country, we live at a remove from our food, and at a distance from where it is produced. We may grow a few tomatoes or beans or peas or perhaps some herbs, but for the most part we are beneficiaries of a food chain that is world wide and almost invisible. We have little knowledge of how our food is produced and how it is harvested, except perhaps during the summer when we enjoy food from a nearby farmers market.

Lately I have been reading "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Professor Kimmerer has a PhD in plant ecology and teaches Environmental and Forest Biology. She is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her book is a reflection on "Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants." It is there that I encountered the phrase "An Honorable Harvest."

Simply put, the tradition of An Honorable Harvest is this: "Take only what you need and use everything you take." It is an understanding that comes from the native wisdom of her people. In many respects it is a 'life principle' and it has counterparts in our Biblical tradition.

Consider: Thirty-seven million people struggle with hunger in the US, including more than 11 million children. Over 350 pounds of food per person goes to waste in America every year, that is, 30-40% of the entire US food supply. The cost of this waste is staggering, especially while so many are hungry. All the while the harvest has become a business, a productive agri-business, with a downside: many don't have enough to eat.

There was hunger in Biblical times too, and the laws of the harvest provided for the hungry: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 19:9-10] In a word, 'Don't take it all, leave some for the poor and the stranger.' Echos of An Honorable Harvest, as understood by native peoples!

"Take only what you need and use everything you take

"Never take more than half and leave some for others

"Harvest in a way that minimizes harm

"Use it respectfully and never waste what you have taken

“Share

“Give thanks for what you have been given

“Give a gift in reciprocity for what you have received.”

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have a relationship with the land and its produce - a duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. Whether food, or anything else for that matter, we have a responsibility to take only what we need and use everything we take - a responsibility to give thanks and to share - to live out the “life principle” of an honorable harvest.

And so, each Thanksgiving Sunday, we came with our gifts, singing: “Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home, all is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin. God our Maker doth provide for our wants to be supplied; come to God’s own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home.” It was a witness to the tradition of An Honorable Harvest. For we know that we have not inherited the earth from our ancestors. We are borrowing it from our grandchildren.