

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Thanksgiving Sunday
November 20, 2022
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“First Fruits or Last [Year’s] Fruits?”
Hebrew Scripture: Exodus 23:16-19



The word ‘thanksgiving’ dates back to the 1530s and is formed by combining the noun 'grateful thought' and the verb 'to bestow or grant'.¹ I love that that the two sentiments of ‘thanks’ and ‘giving’ are grafted together because it seems to indicate that what naturally follows appreciation is generosity.

While I have not seen any hard figures, I have heard from our Council chair that the end of our financial year is ending relatively well. Despite the many financial difficulties we face, despite high inflation rates that have affected the entire world raising the prices of fuel and food, you, the members and friends of Centre Church, have given very generously – even over and above that which you

¹ On-line Etymology Dictionary, “Thanksgiving”, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/thanksgiving>, accessed November 19, 2022.

pledged. Today, I thank all of you for your faithfulness to our collective ministry. Thank you for your tithes pledged to our church, your giving to Loaves & Fishes, and your support of the Feed the Thousands campaign.

Our scripture reading from Exodus provides us with the Biblical origins for today's celebration and our upcoming Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday. In the Ancient Near East, our spiritual ancestors celebrated what was called the 'Festival of the Ingathering' at the end of the year when the crops were harvested and the first fruits of the soil were brought to the House of the Lord (23:16b and 19a). This amazing and beautiful cornucopia before us today is a reenactment of that Festival. Many of us will continue to 'reenact' the Festival as we gather for a Thanksgiving meal this coming Thursday. No matter whether your meal is sumptuous or simple, my prayer is that you will take the time to be thankful for all the blessings in your life.

I am not sure if all of you noticed, but at the conclusion of today's reading there seemed to be a very bazaar injunction. Verse 19 concludes "Do not cook a goat in its mother's milk". Huh? What's that about? Since we are celebrating Thanksgiving this week and many of us are cooking, I'd like to shed some light on this very strange bit of culinary and gastronomical advice.

After doing a bit of reading this week, I learned that biblical scholars have long debated the meaning and significance of this verse.² The most prominent theory is that this verse is simply an ancient Hebrew admonishment not copycat how pagan Egyptian or Canaanite people once offered a cultic sacrifice to a foreign god. This theory, on the surface, seems to make the most sense. If correct, we can pretty much ignore and dismiss the injunction as archaic and obsolete – not that we would want to boil a young goat in its own mother’s milk anyway. Today, we just roast a turkey in the oven or order Chinese take-out.

A theory that I like much more than the first is that the prohibition against cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk is a means by which to honor and respect nature, Creation. I like this theory as our President and leaders of the world are wrapping-up a COP27 conference at a Red Sea resort in Egypt that will hopefully help us reduce the devastation we are wreaking on our planet.³ This theory subscribes to the view that mother’s milk is the source of life for its young. To cook the young goat in its own mother’s milk is cruel and inhumane. It is cruel and inhumane to continue our addiction to fossil fuels that heat-up our planet. It

² J. Webb Mealy, “You Shall Not Boil a Kid in its Mother’s Milk (Exod. 23:19b; Exod. 34:26b; Deut. 14:21b): A Figure of Speech?”, *Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 20, 2012, 35-72.

Also see: Stephan Schorch, “A Young Goat in Its Mother’s Milk”? Understanding an Ancient Prohibition”, *Vetus Testamentum*, Volume: 60:1, 2010, 116-130.

³ Valerie Volcovici, Dominic Evans, and William James, “COP27 Deal Delivers Landmark on ‘Loss and Damage’, But Little Else”, *Reuters*, November 20, 2022.

is cruel and inhumane to heat the planet for my children, Micah and Madeline, and for their yet unborn children (should they choose to even have them).

As sensible as the first two theories explaining how not to prepare a goat for Thanksgiving sound, I find a third theory the most convincing. The third theory directs us to the to the other two places in the Bible where this prohibition is mentioned. That's right! This quirky verse is found not once, not twice, but three times in the Bible. The first time we read the verse is Exodus 23:19 that Drew read. The second time verse is found a little later in Exodus 34:26. The third time the verse is found is in Deuteronomy 14:21. The most convincing argument explaining this strange verse asserts that the secret to solving the riddle is what all three verses have in common in regards to their contexts.

The two verses forbidding a goat to be cooked in its mother's milk *both* follow the instruction, "The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God" (23:19 and 34:26). I do not believe it is only a coincidence that twice the strange verse follows the same instruction about first fruits. The third time (in Deuteronomy) we hear the objection to boiling a young goat in its mother's milk is very similar to the first two. However, the forbidding of goat cooked in its mother's milk comes before, rather than after, the verse about the harvest. Deuteronomy 12:21-22 reads, "You shall not boil a young goat in its

mother's milk. You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field *year by year*". If we read carefully, we can see that all three instructions about first fruits being gathered *precede or follow* the instruction not to cook with a young goat in its mother's milk.

The theory explaining the reference to goat's milk is that that the prohibition is actually only a Hebrew idiom that advises one not to combine the old with the new or not to combine one generation's produce with the next. We hear hints of a similar idioms in the Christian scriptures. While answering questions and refuting accusations, Jesus reminded his hearers that 'no one uses new cloth as a patch for clothes made of old cloth' and "no one puts new wine in old wineskins" (Matthew 9:17). Even today we say, 'One bad apple spoils the whole bunch'. The meaning of the strange verse about goat's milk becomes clear if we realize that the context of all three verses is a directive saying that we must offer our first fruits and *not our leftovers* (not food from last year nor food from last year mixed in with food from this year). Fresh food from *this year* is what should be offered to the Lord. You see, the mother's milk derives from a previous generation and the young goat is from the current generation. It is not recommended to cook them together.

This explanation begins to make sense if we remember the story of God providing manna when the Israelites were lost in the desert. The God prohibited the Israelites from gathering the manna, hoarding it, and storing it for the next day. When the Israelites tried to eat yesterday's manna on a new day, it turned rotten. Yesterday's manna is not for today. Old wine skins are not for new wine. Don't prepare one generation's food in a previous generation's milk.

What does all of us say to us on this Thanksgiving Sunday when we hear from our Long-Range Planning Team? I think our very strange scripture about goat's milk advocates to us that we are to bring a tithe, a tenth, of *this generation's harvest* to the house of the Lord because the Lord will do *new* and great things with us "year by year". I believe that God will do new things in our lives and new things in our church's life. Let us not chart the future of our church based on what happened in the past. Let us give thanks and trust that God will do new things, "year by year". Let us not mix the mistakes and shortcomings of the past with the new possibilities that are before us. New manna. New wine. New milk. New plans. New visions. New beginnings. Give thanks always, "year by year".

This was the world of God and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, "Amen".