Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



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November 26, 2021

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After a most enjoyable, educative and affirming production about *Fannie Lou Hamer* I turned to the Black women seated next to me, with whom I'd struck an easy camaraderie prior to the show (further solidified by our mutually loud sighs and acknowledgments of the parallels between the show and our lives). As I stood to leave, I wished them Happy Thanksgiving, to which one of them pointedly and empathetically replied, "Happy Holidays." As I left the theater, I reflected back to that moment and the polite rebuke conveyed by her response, and I felt a little ashamed.

I have never been comfortable with the whole notion of the holiday known as Thanksgiving. It wasn't something that I'd grown up celebrating, and it has also been tainted by my experience over the years. One time — around 2007 — I had chosen the songs for Mass that day. I was living in an international community and thus had the blessing of hearing and singing songs in various languages during liturgy. With a sizeable number of Swahili speakers, we often chose one or two songs in that language.

The night before as I was helping with supper cleanup, a white member of the community came up to me and said, "I hope you put down some American songs for tomorrow; you do know it's an American holiday?" I replied that I didn’t think the notion of giving thanks was limited to any group of people and I also did not consider liturgical songs as having any nationality.

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Another time in 2018, a professor asked me my plans for the holiday, and when I mentioned that I planned to study, she chided me for failing to observe the holiday. But by that time, I'd learned a whole lot more about the history of this country and realized that Thanksgiving is a holiday designed to celebrate individual freedom and liberty — at the same time as those same liberties and freedoms are stripped away from others. It is a holiday rooted in domination, exploitation, appropriation and violence.

The portrayal of Fannie Lou Hamer's life — played so masterfully by E. Faye Butler — reminded me that the struggle is far from over for Black and brown folks in America. That’s why I was ashamed to have mindlessly uttered "Happy Thanksgiving" to my

kin who are mired in the same struggle every day as Fannie was in the '60s and their ancestors for generations.

I am still reeling from the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse as I write this, an acquittal that translates into less freedom and liberty for Black and brown kin and their allies, who get terrorized, beaten, lynched and murdered for jogging, selling loose cigarettes or DVDs on a street, holding a cellphone, driving, walking, falling asleep in the car, having a mental health crisis, sitting or sleeping in their homes, standing in their family's backyard, walking down the stairs, playing with a toy gun … the list is endless.

I think of the pioneers of this holiday, happy to have found a "new" world where they could practice their faith freely and prosper. Even though some historical renderings of that first celebration hint at mutuality and the ways Indigenous peoples ensured the survival of those first pilgrims, history tells us later of the systematic genocide that was meted in subsequent years and their continued marginalization in the present day.

These same pioneers pursued prosperity through slave ownership and the persecution of fellow human beings, justifying their right to do so with the same faith that propelled them to flee their own persecution in Europe. Slave ownership was given up, reluctantly, in the letter of the law; however, its insidious roots can still be found in many aspects of modern-day society that treat Black and brown folk as less than and consider them less deserving even when they work twice as hard.

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As I look ahead to this week, when families will gather again to celebrate this holiday that acknowledges abundance, I wonder why we cling so tightly to this abundance and refuse to share it with others. Why, when it comes to welcoming those who are different, we suddenly hearken to the false proclamation of scarcity that is peddled by politicians and right-wing nationalists. The myth of scarcity tells us that immigrants are taking jobs from us, that they aren't paying taxes and are living off

social welfare, and even that their men will rape and kill our women and children.

Some seem to think that if immigrants must come here, then they should at least be more grateful, try to fit in better, speak English with an American accent, stick to their own neighborhoods. Some disguise their resistance as concern that we're contributing to a form of exploitation by taking highly skilled professionals from their countries, where instead we should be directing more money and aid.

This is not an assertion that people of color aren't thankful or that they don't gather over the long weekend as many other families do, but that their gratitude is often colored by the truth of their reality, which is mired in pain, suffering, discrimination, oppression and marginalization. It is a fact that the bounty found on many tables during this season is hard to come by because of financial inequalities, and that some family members have been missing at the table for years due to the injustice of the criminal justice system or because of the punitive nature of an immigration system that keeps families apart for decades.

So where does all this leave us? Perhaps, with a little more sensitivity as to how we approach this holiday. Although it's a story of triumph and jubilation for some Americans, it is not so for many others. We would do well to be more introspective about our own behavior and attitudes toward those who desire to share in the same liberty and freedom we possess. Perhaps we could make a commitment to learn more about the history of this country and be more intentional about ensuring that the same cycles of oppression and exploitation are not repeated in the future.

This doesn't mean that I will cease to be thankful. I will gather with some Kenyan friends, grateful that we have each other to lean on in a country that sometimes meets our enthusiasm with a cold rebuff. We will think of our families back home, about whom we constantly worry, and patch each other up to face yet another day, another season, with the hope that we shall one day be rid of racism entirely.