

“First Fruits, Whole Hearts”

November 23, 2025

When Pope Leo’s list of five favorite movies came out a week or two ago, one of my seminary professors said he knew there was at least one film missing. They’d been in class together for four years, so they knew each other pretty well. He dug through boxes of old photos until he found a picture of Leo, then known as Bob, dressed as Elwood Blues. According to my friend, the fact that the “Blues Brothers” wasn’t included suggests that the published list had been scrubbed, cleaned up, sanitized a bit to fit the narrative of what a Pope should be watching.

This reminded me of a story from the making of one of my favorite films, “The Muppet Movie.” Jim Henson and Frank Oz were filming a scene in 1979. Studio executives were pressuring Henson to make the movie faster, funnier, punchier—more jokes, more gags, more spectacle. In the push to get a laugh, Henson had written a cheap gag at Kermit’s expense. In the middle of filming, Frank Oz—who was voicing Miss Piggy (who I will note was never quiet) and Fozzie and so many others—stopped the whole production. He told Henson, “You cannot make Kermit do that. He is supposed to lead, not lie.”

The studio went silent. Frank Oz had just challenged the great creator himself.

But Frank Oz did it because he believed integrity mattered—that even characters made of felt and foam needed to be trustworthy. He believed children needed to see honesty, loyalty, and courage embodied, even in the silliness of a puppet.

The next day, Henson called him to his trailer. He was expecting an apology. Instead, Oz brought Henson the script with red ink all over it, outlining how certain jokes undermined the emotional truth of the characters. Henson, who was normally gentle, was under intense pressure from the studios to speed up production and also double down on the laughs. Instead, he read the notes quietly. When hooked up, and said, “You are right. We fix it.”

From that day forward, one rule guided all Henson projects: No joke could violate the characters’ integrity. When asked, Frank Oz later said he risked his relationship because, “Honesty matters—even when it comes from felt and foam.”

I keep thinking about that—about how integrity matters even in small things, even when the world pressures us to be quicker, more productive, more accommodating, less gracious, less principled. It matters in the stories we tell and in the stories we live.

And I think that is exactly the spiritual terrain of Thanksgiving.

Off-center

Thanksgiving, like so many holidays, is beautiful and complicated. It brings us into family systems, cultural myths, and emotional patterns that can pull us in directions we don’t always want to go. Many of us know the feeling of sitting at a table where we desperately want to be gracious and grateful, and yet find ourselves shrinking from conflict...or playing along with a

version of ourselves that no longer fits...or biting our tongues when someone says something harmful.

Holidays can tempt us away from integrity—toward peacekeeping instead of peacemaking, toward silence instead of truth-telling, toward pretending instead of grounding ourselves in what is real, what is healthy. And yet, at its best, Thanksgiving is a holiday about wholeness, about practicing gratitude, practicing truth, practicing connection, and about choosing the story we want to live inside.

The Scriptures

Which brings us to today's scriptures. In Deuteronomy 26, the people are told to bring their "first fruits"—the earliest portion of the harvest, the part that comes before you know whether the fields will yield enough for winter, before you know how the weather will turn, before the tax return has been filed, before you know the future.

It is radical to give away the first fruits. It is radical to trust God enough to offer what is most precious before you have guaranteed security.

But that's what integrity looks like—giving the truth of who we are, even before we know how it will land. Giving the fullness of our love even before we know if it will be reciprocated. Giving our hospitality to strangers, not knowing if they'll ever become friends. Giving our best selves before the world rewards us for it.

Deuteronomy says, "You shall take the first fruits...and you shall set them down before the Lord your God...and you shall celebrate with the Levites and the strangers who reside among you." The "strangers." The immigrants. The newcomers. The people at the margins of society. Thanksgiving in scripture is always tied to justice. The offering is not complete until it is shared.

And then we hear Paul say in Philippians: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." I've been stuck on that word "supplication" this year. Supplication isn't just a prayer—it is a posture of earnest vulnerability. It means kneeling with our whole selves—our longing, our griefs, our hopes, our fears—and offering them honestly to God. Handing them over. Supplication is integrity in prayer.

And Paul follows it immediately with these words: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable... whatever is just... think on these things." He is saying: Let your inner life match your outer life. Let your values match your actions. Let your gratitude expand your courage. Let integrity guide your thanksgiving.

Integrity is exactly what we are seeing in clergy and activists across the country right now, resisting the abductions and detention of our immigrant neighbors. Rev. Jason Coulter spoke recently about standing with people who simply wanted to pray with those detained at the ICE Broadview detention center in Chicago. "You may see the news say 'violent protestors raised their fists,' when in fact we raised our arms in prayer." They were armed with pillows and toothpaste and cell phones, all things these people who have been detained without due process

have been denied. That is Thanksgiving integrity: gratitude that leads to courage, gratitude that leads to solidarity, gratitude that leads to protecting the vulnerable.

And even the U.S. Catholic bishops—who do not issue what they call “Special Messages” often—released one this fall, lamenting the climate of fear, the denigration of immigrants, the threats against houses of worship, and the dehumanization of families being separated. Their message was simple: the dignity of every person is non-negotiable. This is what it means to offer our first fruits, our best, our most courageous selves, not our leftovers.

And this is interesting, because gratitude isn’t an action, it’s a way of being. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her essay “The Serviceberry,” says gratitude is not just saying “thank you.” It is a relationship, and indeed, it’s one that creates a sense of abundance rather than scarcity. Gratitude, she says, naturally leads to reciprocity: when we receive a gift, we look for a way to give something back.

She asks, “What would change if we treated everything we consumed as gift rather than commodity? What would change if we recognized the earth as giver and ourselves as recipients within a web of reciprocity?”

She goes on, “The Indigenous philosophy of the gift economy has no tolerance for artificial scarcity. Hoarding won’t save us. All flourishing is mutual.”

Thanksgiving integrity means confronting the false scarcity our culture manufactures—scarcity of compassion, scarcity of welcome, scarcity of rights, scarcity of resources, scarcity of trust—and daring to live with abundance.

Randy Woodley, who writes on spirituality and the Indigenous experience, reminds us that Thanksgiving has often functioned as a national myth used to wipe away the brutality, displacement, and attempted genocide of Native peoples. But rather than abandon Thanksgiving, Woodley encourages us to transform it: To lament honestly. To tell the truth about the land and the peoples who cared for it. To practice hospitality to the stranger, the newcomer, the neighbor. To remember that Native peoples were the hosts at that first feast—and still are. Thanksgiving integrity means telling the truth about the harm, and also lifting up the vision of friendship and mutuality that could have been, and most importantly, still can be.

So what does integrity look like for us? The Gottman Institute recently offered reflection questions for this season, and I find myself returning to them as spiritual practices of integrity:

1. What is something small in your daily life that you’re grateful for but often overlook?
2. What is one challenge you faced this year that you’re now thankful for, and why?
3. What traditions or rituals during the holidays hold the most meaning for you, and why?
4. How do you practice gratitude in your daily life, and what could you do to incorporate it more intentionally?
5. What moment in the past year brought you unexpected joy or peace?
6. What are you looking forward to this season?

These questions help us live in alignment with what is true. So, friends, here is my Thanksgiving invitation: Bring your first fruits. Bring the best of yourself, your courage, your truth, your

compassion, before you know whether it will be safe, before you know whether it will be reciprocated, before you know whether it will be “enough.”

Offer your supplications. Bring your whole heart to God—the grief, the longing, the exhaustion, the joy. Honor gratitude with reciprocity. Remember that thanksgiving is only complete when it turns into generosity, justice, hospitality, solidarity.

Live with integrity—in your families, in your parenting, in your politics, in your daily life. Choose what is true. Choose what is honorable. Choose what is just. Choose what builds peace. Frank Oz stopped a camera because integrity mattered even for a puppet.

How much more, then, does it matter for us, people made in the image and likeness of God, people entrusted with strangers and neighbors, people called to love justice and walk humbly?

May we be a people whose thanksgiving is not just a holiday but a way of life. May we be a people whose gratitude deepens our integrity. May we be a people whose first fruits bless the world.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Philippians 4:4-9
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