

A Few Thoughts About Thanksgiving

Philippians 4:6-9 November 18, 2007

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, followed closely by the Fourth of July. I am certain this has not always been true. As a child the excitement of Christmas and the candy of Easter, not to mention the bunny, made those my favorites. I like to think that as I have matured, the holidays that have remained somewhat pure and resisted extreme commercialization have come to the fore as the very best. And, yes, I have come to cherish the Fourth of July even before I came to cherish the “real live nephews and nieces of my Uncle Sam” born on that date. I have encountered an abundance of these people of whom I am quite fond, especially here in the East. The religious significance of Christmas and Easter is not lost on me, but Thanksgiving Day trumps them both.

I believe this is partly because it is a true family holiday when “we gather together” and realize that we have much to be thankful for, even one another, and it is partly because I am a Congregationalist from head to toe. For Congregationalists, Thanksgiving is close to being a high holy day.

I am sure you all know the story of the first Thanksgiving and are acquainted with the history that led up to it. But, because it never hurts to refresh our memories I will share a brief capsule, a thumbnail sketch of the history of that event and of events beyond that first Thanksgiving. Much of this information comes from a little book entitled The Thanksgiving Book and some of it comes from that online gem known as “The Turkey Quiz.” There will be a couple of instances in which you will have to fill in the blanks.

The first Thanksgiving was held in the fall of 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Of course, festivals and celebrations to the gods in thanks for the harvest predated this. In biblical times the Hebrews held the Feast of Tabernacles; the ancient Greeks held festivals in honor of Demeter, the goddess of harvests; the Romans honored Ceres, the goddess of grain and there were celebrations in the New World, long before the Pilgrims arrived.

Before the celebration in 1621, in the winter of 1620, 102 English colonists had landed in southeastern Massachusetts. The area had been explored by English Captain John Smith (of Pochahontas fame) in 1614, and the waters there, rich with a variety of fish, had been harvested by the English since the early 1500s.

The Plymouth settlers, several of whom were Separatists, who had rebelled against the rites and discipline of the Church of England, were in search of a new home after a sojourn in Holland. They stayed in Holland for 12 years, returned to England and set sail for the New World. It was with these souls that Congregationalism came to this strange, new place.

The ship they sailed on was the Mayflower. They landed in Plymouth in December of 1620 and had a difficult winter during which many died. By spring only 55 of the original 102 were still alive. It was only with the assistance of the Wampanoag Indians that they survived. Tisquantum, also known as, Squanto --showed them how to plant corn and squash and how to hunt and fish.

In the autumn of 1621 the settlers harvested their first crops. Had it not been for the Native Americans there would have been no crops. The seeds the Pilgrims brought with them, with the exception of barley, all failed.

The Wampanoag were under enormous pressure when the Pilgrims arrived. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the tribe had been killed by diseases brought by foreign explorers, and the remaining members were fending off attacks from a neighboring tribe, the Narragansett (a powerful tribe from Rhode Island, known to be warriors) . With both groups struggling, the time was perfect for cooperation that helped both

Pilgrims and Native Americans survive. As fate would have it, Squanto and Samoset, an Abnaki Indian from Maine, had been kidnapped and enslaved by English traders and had learned English. They had escaped their captors and were able to act as mediators between the Pilgrims and Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoag. John Carver, the first governor of Plymouth colony, and Massasoit negotiated a treaty of mutual support. Because of this time of peace, all survived to share the three-day festival that became our Thanksgiving—a time marked by feasting and proclamations and prayers of gratitude to God.

In 1769 President George Washington, declared the first official national day of Thanksgiving to be Thursday, November 26th. For a while Thanksgiving floated in the ether and a celebration of it was left up to the individual states to determine. On October 3, 1863, at the urging of Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the influential magazine, *Godey's Lady's Book*, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day to be celebrated on the last Thursday of November.

In 1939, Franklin Delano Roosevelt changed the date to a week earlier in November to expand the Christmas buying season to help end the Depression. This change lasted for 2 years and in 1941, it was moved back to the 4th Thursday in November. The movable feast had stopped moving.

We will celebrate Thanksgiving this coming week, the fourth Thursday of November.

“So, Alice,” you might ask, “What does this have to do with our reading in Philippians?” I am glad you asked.

On this Thursday, this special time set aside for reflection on all the wonders of life and all the gifts God has given each of us, we need to pause to offer up our prayers of Thanksgiving. If we find ourselves struggling because we may be in a dark and difficult place in life, we need to shift our focus from what it is that seems to be so negative and impossible to “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” If we begin to think about these things, my Beloved Friends, we will see that they are all around us in people and places and in life and we will be able to thank our God for our many blessings.

I am going to close with an Iroquois Prayer that comes to us from the 1800s. Let us pray:

We return thanks to our mother, the earth that sustains us. We return thanks to the rivers and streams, which supply us with water. We return thanks to all herbs, which furnish medicines for the cure of our diseases. We return thanks to the corn, and to her sisters, the beans and squash, which give us life. We return thanks to the bushes and trees, which provide us with fruit. We return thanks to the wind, which moving the air, has banished diseases. We return thanks to the moon and stars, which have given us their light when the sun was gone. We return thanks to our grandfather *He-no*, that he has protected his grandchildren from witches and reptiles, and has given us his rain. We return thanks to the sun, that he has looked upon the earth with a beneficent eye. Lastly, we return thanks to the Great Spirit, in whom is embodied all goodness, and who directs all things for the good of his children. Amen