



The Meaning of Thanksgiving

| *What were you taught about the history and meaning of Thanksgiving? How will you celebrate it this year?*

Introduction

Just say the words “Thanksgiving Day,” and most of us can immediately call to mind a number of images. For some, there are visions of family holidays spent around a table groaning with the traditional Thanksgiving spread. Others may conjure up elementary-school memories of dressing as a Pilgrim or an Indian. Others have memories of collecting canned goods at church or at school designated for Thanksgiving baskets to be delivered to the less fortunate. Imbedded in those memories is that sense of anticipation at the year’s first holiday off from school, signaling the countdown to the extended holiday season.

Yet all of these images paint a pretty stereotypical picture of Thanksgiving. The nostalgic view of the family around the table leaves out both the tensions and squabbles of many family gatherings and the realities of those who are left alone on a family holiday. Our memories of past Thanksgivings are often colored by what we think it should have been like, not what it really was.

While a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving portrait doesn’t fit every family, there is something fundamental about giving thanks—and doing it with those one considers family. In a society that is increasingly more multicultural and interfaith, setting aside time to give thanks and to enjoy time with one’s family is an experience that cuts across many faiths and cultures.

Thankfulness

Giving thanks is central to who we are as Christians, a natural impulse in response to what God has given us. In her book *Real Kids, Real Faith*,¹ Karen-Marie Yust



The Thanksgiving holiday is connected to the Pilgrims’ observance in 1621 of what was probably a harvest celebration.

identifies thanksgiving as one of what she calls normative concepts for understanding what it means to live a faithful life (others include belonging, giftedness, hospitality, understanding, and hope). She suggests that we want our children (and by extension, we desire for ourselves) to live our lives with a sense of gratitude grounded in dependence on God rather than with a sense of entitlement grounded in our own self-reliance. This kind of reliance on God stands over against our own culture, where the rugged individual is both prized and rewarded. But thanksgiving is not a warm-and-fuzzy approach to life that denies the bad things that happen to us or that glosses over the very real hardships we may face every day. One has only to turn to the Psalms to understand that thanksgiving arises out of an affirmation that even in the midst of anger, suffering, and despair, we can rely on God’s promises and trust in God’s good purposes.

The apostle Paul also understood all too well both the pain that life can bring and the disappointment human beings can be to one another. While we can’t be sure what his “thorn in the flesh” actually was, it clearly caused him pain and inconvenience. And we can picture him shaking his head sometimes over the squabbles and bad behavior that surfaced in some of the young churches to which his letters were addressed.

Yet despite his own infirmities and the all-too-human foibles of the early Christians, he could affirm again and again, “Thanks be to God!”

The First Thanksgiving: Fact or Fiction?

Most cultures have incorporated rituals of giving thanks at many times and in many places. Though it was likely a harvest celebration, not “the First Thanksgiving,” our own holiday is connected to the Pilgrims’ observance in 1621. The traditional history of Thanksgiving that many of us learned as children is also replete with stereotypes and is actually inaccurate on many counts. In many respects, what we learned about the Pilgrims’ celebration ignores the complexities and the ambiguities of that time. We recall learning that the Pilgrims came to the New World seeking religious freedom, the right to worship their Creator in their own way. But the New World was a harsh place in which to establish a home. We remember learning that the Native Americans these new immigrants encountered taught them how to survive in a strange new land, introduced them to new crops, and helped them to learn the skills they needed. As the story goes, after bringing in a harvest that could sustain them for the winter, they invited the Indians to celebrate with feasting, games, and merriment.

Over the centuries, the basic facts of this narrative have taken on elements of myth. The story we remember leaves out many relevant details. Other details have been added to the tale, elements that may or may not have their basis in historical fact. Add to this a basic reality of historical narrative: how the story is shaped depends on who is telling the story, and usually the one who holds the power tells the *official* story.

Our stories of the establishment of the colonies in the New World are largely from a Eurocentric perspective. Thom White Wolf Fassett, a Native American, recounts that when the Pilgrims landed, Miles Standish led the expeditionary team, traveling south and east and arriving at a place now known as Corn Hill. There Standish and his crew discovered a cache of corn and carried it back to the Mayflower. For the Pilgrims, this represented a lucky find, but for the Native Americans, this constituted theft of a valuable commodity. Later, this theft of Pamet Indian seed corn would figure into one of the first treaties between the immigrant population and

native people. Through the eyes of those peoples living here when the Europeans arrived, the arrival of Pilgrims and others signifies the beginning of disease and warfare that decimated the native populations. Those who were not exterminated suffered the theft of the lands they occupied and the loss of much of their culture, all in the name of the establishment of a new land.²

Jacqueline Keeler recalls her own family’s perspective on Thanksgiving:

When I was six, my mother, a woman of the Dineh nation, told my sister and me not to sing “Land of the Pilgrim’s pride” in “America the Beautiful.” Our people, she said, had been here much longer and taken better care of the land. We were to sing “Land of the Indian’s pride” instead.³

Keeler recalls that she was proud to sing the new lyrics at school, but she sang softly.

For Native Americans and other indigenous people, the first Thanksgiving may be a symbol of mourning, not celebration. In recent years some Native Americans have gathered to observe what they call Un-Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November.

Even where there is documentation of the historical facts, it can be open to a variety of interpretations. For example, the Puritans did leave their homeland at least in part in order to worship freely in their own way. Some historians therefore argue that the celebration was in reality more a secular harvest festival than an occasion of thanksgiving. Because it was a three-day celebration that involved feasting, games, sporting events, and secular songs, these experts believe the observance was more closely related to the revelries typically held in England to celebrate a successful harvest. Thanksgiving for these strictly religious folk would have involved fasting instead of feasting, as well as religious services with sermons and prayer.

Others point out that the Pilgrims did not celebrate holidays that are not mentioned in the Bible—not even Easter or Christmas. Therefore they would not have celebrated thanksgiving as a holiday unless it was closely related to a holiday mentioned in Scripture. In fact, there is such a holiday, Succoth, the Feast of Booths. Tracy Rich, a Conservative Jew who is the creator of the Web site jewfaq.org, describes the customs associated with Succoth in which the booth, or *sukkah*, is decorated

with squash, corn, and other decorations associated with Thanksgiving. She remarks that as a child she was taught that the Pilgrims, looking to the Bible for an appropriate way to celebrate their gratitude for a good harvest, borrowed the idea from this Jewish holiday.⁴

The National Holiday

Regardless of the true facts of that first observance, we do know that the tradition did not continue unbroken from that feast. The feast was not repeated the next year. But in 1623, a day of fasting and prayer was declared on the occasion of a drought, a day transformed to a day of thanksgiving when rain began to fall. In New England the custom of having a day of thanksgiving after harvest gradually took hold, with various presidents either affirming the observance or ignoring it altogether. It was not until President Abraham Lincoln designated the third Thursday of November as Thanksgiving that it achieved the status of a national holiday.

Sentimentalized myth played an important role in the establishment of the national holiday. In 1827, Sarah Josepha Hale wrote a novel titled *Northwood*, in which she included an idealized account of a Thanksgiving dinner. Hale, an editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, began to campaign for a national holiday. Over the years she published many editorials promoting the idea and wrote letters to state and territorial governors. By 1860, thirty-three states and territories were observing Thanksgiving on the same day. But the Civil War intervened. Hale was undeterred; she asked Lincoln to establish a national holiday, which he did in 1863. It remained the third Thursday of November until 1939, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt moved the observance to the fourth Thursday.

What Was Eaten

At that first meal, historical record is only specific about two dishes: venison and fowl (which may have included turkey). We know some of the foods that might have been a part of the meal, but we cannot be certain of exactly what was served. We do know that pies were probably not a part of the meal since there were no ovens, nor was anything that had to be sweetened with sugar. Possibly pumpkin was cooked and mashed. During that time period it was typical to have salt on the table but not pepper (although it was available for cooking). And we know various seasonings were routinely used, including cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg, as well as dried fruit.



The Puritans would have recognized Thanksgiving by fasting instead of feasting, as well as by holding religious services with sermons and prayer.

People in that time had spoons and knives but no forks, and they may have used their fingers as well. Adults were served by servants and children.⁵ Presumably there was no “children’s table,” as we sometimes have at our holiday meals!

How We Eat It

Many differences reflect the small unique twists on tradition that a family may develop over time. In one family, members come to the table comfortably clad in jeans, all the while enjoying a table set with the fine china, silver, and crystal (many pieces with chips) passed down through the generations. Another family sets up a table outside and uses paper plates, disposable cups, and plasticware. In still another, mother and daughters tie on vintage aprons and work together to prepare the meal once prepared by the now-deceased grandmother who had first worn the aprons.

Alternative Celebrations

There are always those for whom nothing will do but an unconventional approach to the holiday. For some, Turkey Day takes on a whole new meaning dictated by matters of principle. The Celebration of Turkeys takes place in two rural locations, one in upstate New York and one in northern California. The menu is vegan—in California, it centers on tofurkeys as well as the traditional side dishes, while in New York, people bring potluck dishes to share. Turkey is definitely the king of the Celebration of Turkeys but in a distinctly different way: here the turkeys are the main attraction instead of the main dish. Run by Farm Sanctuary, an animal protection-and-rescue group, the turkeys themselves feast on fruits and vegetables. After the event people adopt the turkeys and take them home as pets.⁶

Other events use a different lens to view the holiday. The Un-Thanksgiving is the Indigenous Peoples’

Thanksgiving Day Sunrise Gathering. It had its inception in the 1970s not long after the nineteen-month standoff that resulted from a Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. At the Un-Thanksgiving, participants pay homage to those who died defending native lands. Indian groups from around the country participate in traditional dances, speeches, and prayers. The first boats leave Fisherman's Wharf for Alcatraz at 5:00 a.m. Thanksgiving Day, filled with the three thousand-plus people who make this their Thanksgiving observance.⁷

Consumption— and Consumption

For some, the emphasis seems to be less on thankfulness and more on consumption for its own sake. A *New York Times* article described what happens at Artie's Delicatessen on the Upper West Side, where eight persons each get a ten-pound turkey to devour. The goal: to consume as much of it as they can in twelve minutes. The 2003 champion, 105-pound Sonya Thomas, won her crown by eating nearly eight pounds of turducken (a turkey stuffed with a duck stuffed with a chicken). George Shea, chairperson of the International Federation of Competitive Eating, cites the event as "inspiring."⁸

The consumption god rears its ugly head over the Thanksgiving weekend in other ways as well. If not so overtly repulsive as attempting to wolf down in minutes what amounts to a feast in much of the world, Black Friday is nonetheless a celebration of consumption. Although Christmas decorations have already been in the retail stores for weeks, the Friday after Thanksgiving is the official start of the holiday shopping season.

The term *Black Friday* originally was used to describe the traffic jams on roads and in retail stores on the Friday after Thanksgiving. While not the busiest retail-shopping day of the year (it ranks somewhere between fifth and tenth), it is one of the busiest in terms of numbers of shoppers. It's not uncommon for shoppers to line up well before opening hours, often streaming through the doors at opening in a mad rush. Black Friday also refers to the fact that many retailers operate at a loss during the rest of the year, relying on the holiday season to move them from red ink into black. Other designations for the day include the more positive-sounding Green Day (for the amount of greenbacks generated) or Blitz Day. Regardless of what you call it, the focus is on shopping.⁹ If Thanks-

giving is about being thankful for what one has, Black Friday might be seen as being about demonstrating what one can purchase because of what one has.

If we who call ourselves Christians want to approach the holidays intentionally and thoughtfully, it might serve us well to begin with a consideration of the role a day of thanksgiving should have in our lives and in what direction thankfulness might point us as we celebrate. What traditions give shape to a faithful response? Who is included at our tables—and who is left out? What do our stories—both corporate and individual—have to say about who we are as a people? Are our holiday celebrations characterized by an "attitude of gratitude" or by shopping till we drop?

About the Writer

Martha Bettis-Gee is associate for child advocacy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Martha celebrates Thanksgiving by cooking what her family calls the Mabel Dawdy Bettis Commemorative Meal, which includes dishes her mother prepared for Thanksgiving served on the family china.

Endnotes

1. Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
2. Thom White Wolf Fassett, *Giving Our Hearts Away: A Mission Study for 2008–2009*, with Study Guide by Brenda Connelly. Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church; publication pending.
3. Jacqueline Keeler, "Thanksgiving from a Native Point of View," Students and Teachers Against Racism, at <http://www.racismagainstandians.org/Perspectives/Essays/ThanksgivingNativePoint.htm>.
4. "Sukkot," Judaism 101, at <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday5.htm>.
5. Kathleen Curtin, food historian, Plimoth Plantation. From information in an interview dated November 21, 2006, at <http://www.archaeology.org/online/interviews/curtin.html>.
6. Farm Sanctuary's *Celebration FOR the Turkeys*, http://www.adoptaturkey.org/turkey_celebration06.htm.
7. "Native Americans Mourn Loss of Land with 'Unthanksgiving' Rite," *The News Explorer*, <http://www.despardes.com/NewsExplorer/112505-unthanksgiving.html>.
8. Nora Krug, "Alternative Thanksgiving: A Holiday Beyond the Football on TV," *New York Times*, November 11, 2005. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/11/travel/11ahead.html>.
9. Wikipedia, "Black Friday (shopping)," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Friday_\(shopping\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Friday_(shopping)).