

"CELEBRATING THANKSGIVING"

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago there was a full page ad on the last page of the first section of the New York Times that caught my eye. There was a picture of an attractive young lady and next to her were these words:

"What am I thankful for this Thanksgiving? Plenty. My health is frisky and vibrant, my job's still challenging and satisfying. I love my boss. I have fabulous friends and a lifestyle I've always wanted - plus - best of all - a terrific man who is in love with me. My favorite magazine tells me to 'rejoice'....it's a great time to be a woman in this best of all possible times for women, in a city I adore. I love that magazine. I guess you could say I'm that COSMOPOLITAN GIRL!"

Health. Work. Friends. A lifestyle. Love. The City. Indeed, for her it is a great time to be alive! It's all there...expressed perhaps in words and in a way that we might not put it, but we do have so many things for which to be thankful as we approach Thanksgiving. Those personal blessings that mean so much. Health. Work. Friends. Love. A lifestyle. This city. It's a fine day. It's a special day, clutter it as we sometimes do with indigestion and with football. Yes, basically...it's a time of the spirit when we let it be, and a time of the heart, despite ourselves.

DEVELOPMENT

Against the long traditions that lie behind our day of Thanksgiving, and especially against the scene of that first Thanksgiving in 1621, I would like us to remind ourselves that this approaching holiday is not really an American innovation. Its roots are long. Its traditions are hallowed in the long experience of man on this earth.

Noah, back there in the Old Testament, after the great flood, offered up prayers of thanksgiving to God. And as the Hebrew nation grew, the days of thanksgiving to God for His deliverance and guidance were carefully observed. The Book of Judges tells of the feast of the "in-gathering" where it is written:

"And they went out into the fields and gathered their vineyards and trod the grapes and held festival and went into the House of their God, and did eat and drink..."

Indeed, from Moses at the Red Sea to Jesus preparing to feed the multitudes, the Scriptures summon us to words and deeds of gratitude, even before divine blessings are fully perceived.

TODAY

And today, in an age of too much fashionable despair, the world more than ever needs to hear America's perennial harvest message:

"Take heart! Give thanks. To see clearly about us is to rejoice, and to rejoice is to worship the Father of us all; and to worship Him is to receive more blessings still."

Truly, our cup runs over with the bounty of God - our lives, our liberties, our loved ones; our worldly goods and our spiritual heritage; the beauty of our

land, the breadth of our horizons, and the promise of peace that crowns it all. For all of this, let us give thanks.

This is a time when the differences of a diverse people are forgotten, and all people in this land join in giving thanks to God for the blessings we share - those blessings of freedom, of opportunity, of abundance that make America unique. And in giving thanks for the many blessings we hold dear, let us also pray for the courage, the resourcefulness and the sense of purpose we will need to continue America's sage of progress and to be worthy heirs of the Pilgrim spirit. May we, too, find the strength and the vision to leave behind us a better world and an example that will inspire future generations to new achievements.

ENDANGERED HOLIDAY? There was much to do a few years back over an editorial that appeared in the National Observer that placed Thanksgiving on the list of "endangered species". The language was a bit blunt and it gave us reason for discomfort. It said,

"Thanksgiving is the one holiday we have left to do what Americans are best at - gorging themselves without conscience, unnecessarily and inexplicably. Thanksgiving works because it has absolutely no redeeming social value".

One would like to think that "social value" is precisely what Thanksgiving is rich in. Is it not a time of sharing? Is it not a time of "praising the Lord for His bounty?" Is it not a time for remembering the blessings that are ours? And in our rejoicing, do we not give solemn thought to the plight of the needy, the poor, the unfed, the homeless and less fortunate. So goes the litany that has shaped our past holidays. But, there are those who have moments when they wonder and question if it's still valid. Some would claim it is not.

"So love Thanksgiving while you can, folks" he concluded, "Because the government is likely either to move it to the 4th of August, or to cancel it altogether on the grounds that the Pilgrims were white and Protestant...and that's offensive to...well, who the heck knows?"

Funny reading, to be sure, but it struck me then, and it did again this week, as a rather graceless conclusion to a fine essay with some disturbing insights. Reading it again this week, I was struck by its relevance to the concerns and comments we hear from time to time against the gluttony and the hypocrisy of Thanksgiving, set against the backdrop of hunger - local and world.

And I think that what is hopeful about America today is not this cool cynicism, but the lurking sense of uneasiness. There are people of conscience among us and around us who remember some words of our Lord, "I was hungry and you fed me...and as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me". That bit of our American history from 363 years ago that launched a billion turkeys into that infinite bog of cranberry sauce does have "social value"...if it reminds us of that Bible truth that "of those to whom much is given, much is also expected".

I've often wished that we had three or four Thanksgiving Days each year. Not simply to remind us of our blessings, but to renew our sense of pity - and outrage - for the unblest of our land.

BACK TO THE COSMOPOLITAN GIRL

Back to the Cosmopolitan Girl whom we quoted at the beginning. This word "cosmopolitan" means "to belong to the world...at home...in any country...not local and without prejudice". Granted, I'm stretching things, but I would like to challenge that cosmopolitan girl and others like her to be essentially more cosmopolitan in their view, to look out on the world and let their sensibilities be sensitized by the suffering of others. Yes, to celebrate Thanksgiving with a conscience.

We solve no social problems...whether we feast or fast this coming Thursday. But an American who does not - in some fashion - pause to breathe a word of thanks and share his bread and meat, his warmth and his wine, is perhaps the most unblest of all.

HAVE FUN

Lastly, and perhaps surprisingly, these Pilgrims knew how to have fun. Mencken once defined a Puritan as a person, "haunted by the fear that somewhere, someone might be happy". But the Pilgrims, in the best tradition of the Old Testament, tithed in order to throw a party. The Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 14, verses 22 - 27, provides us with the instruction that must have informed their first Thanksgiving.

"You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year. And before the Lord your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil...that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always..."

Perhaps on that day long ago the Pilgrims read these words which are from the Bible,

"Give and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured onto your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back".

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving. As you come together next Thursday for your lavish celebrations of that special day, may the ghosts of Governor Bradford, Miles Standish, Priscilla and John Alden and others visit you. ~~Now~~ Let me conclude this message by reading to you this year's Thanksgiving Presidential Proclamation. As some of you know, I have made a practice of clipping and filing the various Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations. Some, I feel, are quite good. Running through them all is a deep appreciation of the spiritual values that played a part in the founding of our country and a feeling that God has blessed this land and people in wonderful ways.

President's Proclamation

WASHINGTON, Nov. 10 (UPI) — Following is the text of President Reagan's Thanksgiving Day proclamation:

The White House

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

As we remember the faith and values that made America great, we should recall that our tradition of Thanksgiving is older than our nation itself. Indeed, the native American Thanksgiving antedated those of the new Americans. In the words of the eloquent Seneca traditions of the Iroquois, "Give it your thought, that with one mind we may now give thanks to Him our creator."

From the first Pilgrim observance in 1621 to the nine years before enduring the American Revolution when the Continental Congress declared days of fast and prayer and days of Thanksgiving, we have turned to almighty God to express our gratitude for the bounty and good fortune we enjoy as individuals and as a nation. America truly has been blessed.

This year we can be especially thankful that real gratitude to God is inscribed not in proclamation of government but in the hearts of all our people who come from every race, culture and creed on the face of the

Earth. And as we pause to give thanks for our many gifts, let us be tempered by humility and by compassion for those in need and let us reaffirm through prayer and action our determination to share our bounty with those less fortunate.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, in the spirit and tradition of the Iroquois, the Pilgrims, the Continental Congress and past Presidents, do hereby proclaim Thursday, Nov. 22, 1984, as a day of national Thanksgiving. I call upon every citizen of this great nation to gather together in homes and places of worship to celebrate, in the words of 1784, "with grateful hearts . . . the mercies and praises of their all bountiful Creator."

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have here unto set my hand this 19th day of October in the year of our Lord 1984 and of the independence of the United States of America, 209th.

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Give thanks to the Lord

November 14, 1983

Dear Friend of Park Avenue United Methodist Church,

November is that wonderful time of the year when the weather is still kind, when we are given the luxury of assessing the abundant harvest and when we pause to look back to our American heritage and give thanks.

Each year at this time our thoughts travel back to the brave little band of Puritans, who, having survived the rigors of the bleak New England Winter and reaped the results of their Summer toil, gathered together to thank God for the bountiful harvest He had bestowed upon them.

Yet, in this glad season of Thanksgiving, we are also aware that there are many in our land and here in our city who are hurting and hungry, and that Winter will bring intense pain to many who do not have warm shelter or sufficient food. Indeed, there is human suffering in the shadows of our homes.

Our President has proclaimed Thursday, November 24th, as a day of national Thanksgiving. I would invite you to "gather together to ask the Lord's blessing" here at our Church this coming Sunday, November 20th. Let us remember, as we come to celebrate Thanksgiving, that "gratitude takes three forms: a feeling in the heart, an expression in words, and a giving in return".

An envelope is enclosed in the hope that you will want to make a "giving in return". A part of our Thanksgiving offering this year will be directed to the Yorkville Emergency Alliance which is supporting a number of human service agencies of our neighborhood. We hope you will respond with a gift. Checks may be made payable to our Church.

In the warm spirit of this season of Thanksgiving, and in deep gratitude for your support of our Church's outreach, may I wish for you and yours a thoughtful and joyous Thanksgiving.

Sincerely,

Philip Clarke

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