

THE GRACE OF GRATITUDE

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Thanksgiving is the oldest and most truly American of all our national holidays. And its mode of celebration is little changed from that first Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims way back in 1621. Then, as now, the holiday period was an occasion for thanking God in public worship for His providence, and remembering God's bounty in special feasts at home. In early New England, as now, it was an occasion for families to get together to celebrate. The head of the family, or the one with the biggest house or longest tablecloth, calls a reunion of the family. It is a time of homecoming, as the famous Durie print Home for Thanksgiving that has adorned so many calendars, so charmingly indicates. And it is a time of sharing: Thanksgiving baskets are shared; gifts of fruit are exchanged. The precedent was set on that first Thanksgiving when the Pilgrims invited Massasoit, the Indian chief, to share in their meal. He came but bringing with him 90 braves with brave appetites, outnumbering their hosts by some 40 souls. That is indeed sharing, a precedent seldom equaled.

That first Thanksgiving was called by the Governor of the Colony, William Bradford, as a response to the special providence of God. Late in 1621 when the crops were all in, and the harvest appeared plentiful, he issued this proclamation:

To All the Pilgrims:

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now, I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye pilgrims with your wives and little ones do gather at the meeting house on the hill ... (etc.)

Of course there are historical precedents for harvest festivals. As long as man has tilled the

soil, he has celebrated the harvest season when he reaps the rewards of his labors. There were harvest festivals in the old world, the festival of harvest home in England when the last cart load of grain was brought in from the field. Then was sung the song of harvest home and there was a feast in celebration.

There is, too, the Biblical precedent which probably influenced the Pilgrims even more. They did not celebrate the usual holidays celebrated by the church at home — Christmas and Easter. These were rejected as Roman corruptions. But the Biblical Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth in the Hebrew) may well have been an inspiration. This was basically a harvest festival, but the Hebrew people had poured into it a religious meaning which transcended thanksgiving for the fruits of the earth. They saw in it a reflection of their history under God. The booths, tents, tabernacles which initially probably served as collection points for the harvest

were seen to be symbols of the temporary tents in which the children of Israel lived in the wilderness after their flight from Egyptian bondage to freedom. Thanksgiving is not only for harvest but for God's providence.

And the Pilgrims understood this celebration to be a recognition of the special providence of God. And indeed there was reason to acknowledge God's special providence. In the first place, when the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth rock in December 1620 and moved to take over the land, they found no hostile Indians. The reason was that the land belonged to the Patuxet tribe which prior to their landing had been wiped out by a plague — probably smallpox or measles spread by the white man who earlier had landed in exploration projects. The Pilgrims barely survived that first winter even when they were able to take over these lands without opposition.

There was another great blessing in the early spring after that first winter: the arrival of an English-speaking Christian Indian known as Squanto. He is the friendly Indian mentioned in the history books. In fact, Squanto is a much neglected hero of the early Pilgrim days. It is hard to believe, but prior to the landing of the Pilgrims Squanto had made two round trips to Europe.

In 1605 a Captain Weymouth on a voyage of exploration brought Squanto, a Patuxet Indian, back to England as a kind of souvenir. He learned English and Christianity, but he grew homesick for America. In 1614, then, he returned with Captain John Smith on another voyage of exploration and trade. Unfortunately, after Captain Smith had sailed home, another ship which had sailed with him remained to trade, and its captain captured Squanto and some other Indians and sold them into slavery in Spain. Nothing was ever heard of the others — Indians were never broken to slavery; they preferred death — but Squanto was bought by some friars who treated him well, and soon he had opportunity to go back to England whence he found a way to return to America six months before the Pilgrims. When he found his tribe wiped out, he lived with another, but when he met the Pilgrims, he joined them and became one of their saints, or true believers.

But even more — he it was who taught these Pilgrims who were shop-keepers, artisans, townsfolk how to survive in the wilderness. He taught these innocents abroad how to plant corn on the worn out fields by placing three herring in each hill as fertilizer. He taught them how to

catch the fish and other game, as well. And it is Squanto who arranged the peaceful trade relations with Massasoit, the great Indian chief — and arranged the famous treaty that Governor Bradford reported a quarter century later was never broken. No wonder Governor Bradford records that he was “a special instrument sent by God for their good beyond expectation”.

Finally, and this seemed truly providential, the Pilgrims found stores of seed corn which they used to survive that first winter and to plant crops for the next year.

No wonder the Pilgrims felt special Thanksgiving for the special providence of God. And ever since Americans have felt a special sense of gratitude for God’s providence in making possible not only a new Jerusalem where men could worship God in freedom, but a new world in which God’s bounty would prosper all men.

Thanksgiving, then, was the response for the special providence of God in history — not simply for the fruits of the earth. And this has been the spirit of the thanksgiving season — a sense that the spirit of freedom, shared riches, and fellowship were a uniquely American expression of God’s promise of a new Jerusalem.

Thanksgiving is indeed appropriate, as we survey our history, our situation, and our future. There are problems facing contemporary America, but nothing like the problems of the Pilgrims. And as the Psalmist teaches, it is when we feel troubled and cast down in our souls that we must remember how God has led us in the past, and so have confidence for the future.

In all things give thanks, says Paul. This does not mean to give thanks for all things. We cannot give thanks for pain and sickness and hate and misery and fear. We cannot give thanks that some of our people are being held hostage in our embassy in Iran. We can give thanks that in pain and sickness there are healing forces from God and work, and that in hate and fear there is the power of love to overcome hate and cast out fear. And we can be grateful for the pressure and intercession of nations and peoples on our behalf to mitigate the terrorism in Iran. And who knows but what some Squanto may emerge in Iran as an instrument of God to deliver the people. Even in this, in all things we must give thanks to God, remembering His mercy and guidance, our help in ages past — and our hope for the years to come. There is this blessing in thanksgiving — it gives us a sense of history and purpose as a nation.

But further, there is a grace in gratitude that enriches us spiritually as individuals, as well. It is a free response to God’s goodness. The grace of gratitude can be understood in many ways, just as the term grace has many meanings. We speak of acting with good grace or bad grace, of having the grace to do something. It suggests good will, favor, a pleasing quality. In all of its positive meanings, it reflects the spiritual quality of responding to the love of God.

We can see this clearly negatively in the spirit of ingratitude, as a lack of response to the good will, good acts of another. I think it was Jim Farley, a political advisor to FDR, who first told the story about a congressman who learned that one of his old supporters had withdrawn his contributions. So he goes to his old friend and asks, “How can you do this? Remember how I helped you with a business loan when you needed it? Got your son into West Point? Helped your

no-good son-in-law get on the public pay roll? How can you not support me now?” Came the reply, “That’s all true, but what have you done for me lately?” This is the ungrateful, ungracious spirit.

But there are other ways we can fail to respond to the good will of another. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. Giving is also a more comfortable position than receiving, for the receiver might have to feel “beholden” to the giver, indebted, and therefore unwilling to be in that position. Sometimes, a simple expression of appreciation or gratitude is turned aside and blunted by one’s saying, “that’s my job”, or “you don’t have to thank me”, or “really, it was nothing”. How hard it seems sometimes to accept a simple compliment, as well. It’s almost as if we are reluctant to feel close to another and so we rebuff the expressions of appreciation and sometimes quite ungraciously. Are we reluctant to take free expressions of love?

Giving and taking are really interrelated. When one person takes what another wants to give — like an expression of gratitude — he has thereby given to the other. Conversely, if one refuses to take what another wants to give, refuses the thanks, he has somehow taken from and diminished the other. This explains the irony of the counselor who calls it “resistive” when the counselee refuses to take from the counselor — but calls it “professional ethics” when he refuses to take from the counselee. But, as Jesus taught, expressions of love, given and received, indicate that love is a resource that increases as it is shared. And the grace of gratitude is such an expression of love.

Theologically speaking, grace is the freely given, unmerited love of God; it also means the influence of God regenerating man as a divine virtue. Gratitude is a response to the freely given love of God as experienced in His creation or through another. The grace of gratitude is this response to the influence of God, acting to regenerate one to acts of creative love in response. Gratitude is not a simple amenity or polite social response — it is a reflection of the positive spirit of the love of God. The spirit of gratitude is a response to, and a reflection of, God’s love.

In all things give thanks, says Paul. Rejoice always and pray without ceasing. Thanksgiving, joy, and prayer are conjoined by Paul as marks of the early church and its believers — for thanksgiving, gratitude, points up our blessings, counts our joys, makes us rejoice, and brings us to that constant sense of the love and providence of God which is what is meant by ceaseless prayer in this context.

The grace of gratitude is the response of love. It is giving and receiving of love. And as Paul says elsewhere (Cor. 13), love is patient and kind, never selfish or quick to take offence; love keeps no score of wrongs. But there is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance. Therefore let us in all things be thankful — reflect the grace of gratitude. It is our participation in the love of God.