

# Making Peace With Thanksgiving

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*Keynote Address for the 2014 Grand Rapids Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration*

*Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons*

There is nothing sinful about gathering as a family or with friends to eat a meal steeped in tradition and memories. God isn't against football. It seems like a pretty good idea - dare I even say religious - to remember that there are people in the world who don't have life as good as we do, and to do something nice for them. Why, then, did I feel so guilty every fourth Thursday in November?

As a child I felt suspicious of the Pilgrims. There was something fundamentally unfair about strangers arriving in a new land and taking it away from the people who lived there first. A teacher's, "Well, we're here now so don't worry about it," only confirmed I was on to something. As much as I liked the day with my family, I knew families who wouldn't be together because of the war. When we got back to school I could tell from their silence when the rest of us compared pie counts and turkey sizes, I had friends who couldn't have the feast my family enjoyed.

Growing up taught me a new word for my uneasiness: privilege. It didn't help. Nor did it help to discover that the only truth in the first Thanksgiving story was that there were Pilgrims, there were Indians, and there was a celebration. As far as we know the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims never repeated their celebration. No one much thought about what happened that autumn in 1621 for 200 years. The details most of us learned in elementary school about what our teachers called 'the first Thanksgiving' were little more than the creation of Jane G. Austin in her 1889 historical novel *Standish of Standish*. Thanksgiving observances and rituals had been part of American Indian culture for thousands of years. Spanish colonists held a thanksgiving mass in St. Augustine, FL in 1565, and celebrated thanksgiving with Manso Indians near present day El Paso TX in 1598. French Huguenots observed a thanksgiving celebration in 1564 in what is now Jacksonville FL. English colonists had celebrated thanksgiving in New England in 1607, 1610, and 1619.

While the story of the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving has remained relatively consistent since then, the roles of the Pilgrims and the Indians have been re-written time and again to reflect the crisis or the mood or the prejudices of the country. The Indians were hardly mentioned during the western expansion. The Pilgrims of World War 2 were hardy war-winners whose victory came from God. According to *Look Magazine* in the late 1960s the Pilgrims of the 1960s the Pilgrims were "dissidents" and "commune builders." How is a guy supposed to make peace with a holiday that seems always to be reinventing itself? And when I discovered that the Wampanoag people today observe a day of mourning on the day we celebrate Thanksgiving because of the painful And I needed to make peace with Thanksgiving!

From the doctrine of the trinity to debates about the jurisdiction of the church in matters of marriage, Puritans held deep convictions about how to practice their faith, convictions out of step with the Church of England. As with any religious movement there are always zealots. Puritan zealots were called Separatists. For them there was no compromise and no value to

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reform from within. When the Scrooby Puritan Separatist congregation emigrated illegally to the Netherlands they thought religious freedom would complete their sense of wellbeing. But the society that afforded them freedom of religious expression also afforded others that same freedom. They worried about the moral influences of what they considered a corrupt and permissive culture. The Scrooby congregants were not skilled in ways that permitted them to participate successfully in their new economy. Poverty and deep concerns about providing for themselves in their old age took center stage. 37 of them, along with 65 adventurers recruited by the voyage's financiers, decided to pursue a what they hoped would be a better life in the new world.

The passengers and crew were unprepared to endure the winter of 1620 aboard a ship anchored in Provincetown Harbor. By harvest 1621, half of the passengers had died, including 14 of the 18 married women. Of the 53 passengers remaining nearly half were children and teens, and the adults were mostly widowers, only 3 of whom were over age 40.

That anyone survived was due to the intervention of the Wampanoag people, specifically a Patuxet named Tisquantum. After a 14 year odyssey as a slave worthy of its own telling, Tisquantum returned to his homeland only to find his people had fallen victim to a plague, the origin of which was most likely European traders. Evidence proves Tisquantum's duplicity when dealing with Wampanoag and Pilgrims alike, but motives aside, he attended to the wellbeing of the Plimoth (the Pilgrim's spelling) colonists.

Thanksgivings in Puritan tradition were solemn religious occasions. This is the only paragraph - 112 words - that we have from eyewitnesses:

*Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others.*

In today's terms what the participants recorded about that event some 400 years ago reads more like what historian Robert Tracy McKenzie<sup>1</sup> calls a week of "beer and barbecue, shooting and sports." Many of the Indians turned out to be twice as many as there were Pilgrims. Nothing like a party to attract the neighbors! The scene reads like the typical human response to prolonged pain. Enough already - let's party! After everything they had been through the

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie, Robert Tracy. *The First Thanksgiving*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press. 2013. I am indebted to this resource for the historical facts presented here.

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survivors seem to have needed something to celebrate. And so they made the most of the legitimate reasons at hand to feel relief and gladness and gratitude, and to lay aside the concerns of the day at least for awhile. They needed to recover their sense of wellbeing.

The real story of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag is a story about the human quest for wellbeing. Christians have a word for that. The word is peace. We also have a word for how far people are willing to go to secure the welfare of others. Jesus called that peacemaking.

I have finally made my peace with Thanksgiving. No more trying to force a secular peg into a religious hole. The one-day observance we call Thanksgiving will be forever a secular holiday for me. No more outrage in God's name about retailers opening at midnight Thursday; I choose to express my outrage in the name of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, and others! Even in a secular world families' wellbeing trumps corporate profits or personal savings.

My faith, like that of the Pilgrims, teaches me that gratitude is not a holiday to be celebrated but a discipline to be practiced each day at all times in every circumstance.

My faith teaches me to say I am sorry for wrongs done against others even when my ancestors did them, especially if it leads to reconciliation with others. Thanksgiving for me will forever be a day I stand in solidarity with American Indians as they mourn what they've lost.

My faith teaches me that more important than the thanks I offer to God for my blessings is the thanks that someone else will offer to God because I have used my life to attend to, advocate for, and in any way I can, supply them with a greater sense of wellbeing. *If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them [even on Thanksgiving], "Go in peace [or Happy Thanksgiving]; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;<sup>12</sup> for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God."* (2 Cor 9:11)

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote "a false but clear and precise idea always has more power in the world than one which is true but complex."<sup>2</sup> While Thanksgiving is the occasion that brings us together, we have a more urgent need. Tonight there are people in our world who are not living in peace. So tonight I ask you to embrace a more complex

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<sup>2</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (1834; repr., New York: Harper-Collins, 1969), p. 164.

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celebration of Thanksgiving, one in which you strive to put words of gratitude on the lips of someone else by improving their personal wellbeing. Let us join one another on the narrow path that is peacemaking. Amen.