

**“Thanksgiving is a Unique and Wonderful Holiday”  
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Thanksgiving is indeed a unique and wonderful holiday. Consider how else the nation’s president could have an occasion to exercise clemency in a way that would be politically beneficial. As it is, every year he can commute the death sentence of a turkey that then is flown by jet to Disneyland to lead the Parade. It’s a win for turkeys al around.

And Thanksgiving is, of course, a wonderful family holiday that, at its best, nourishes our connection to home and hearth. Those of us who can are gather with friends and family for a holiday national renewal that lights up all our ritually religious feelings in a setting that is normally safe and comfortable, well controlled by the time-honored, if sometimes painfully familiar customs, foods, and conversations. For others it’s become an occasion to indulge in the warmly fulfilling experience of serving the poor as we find a public kitchen to offer our time and talents in.

For my family for many years it’s been pot-luck of the broadest kind. Living next to the church when we were in Oakland, we never knew who was going to be at our table. Guests, strangers, friends of friends all sometimes mixed with family, or rather layered with family like oil on water. I remember one year when our aged widow friend Gloria came to Thanksgiving dinner with her mother Ella who was well into her nineties. They came along with our young children, my own mother and father, and that year my surgeon brother and his wife who was a medivac nurse. Ella was the life of every party with the hand full of stories she always had available as if on cue. She loved to tell about how she bought the original church building for a dollar after the 1939 Fair on Treasure Island and how it was brought over to Oakland on a barge and moved in its current location where it now serves as the Parish Hall. Or about the time when in that same building the little mission hosted a meeting of the Alameda Deanery with Bishop Block and served a luncheon when all of a sudden the hot water heater – which actually stood right next to the back door, which of course was the front door – sprung a leak. And several of the men completely at a loss what to do were saved by Ella and the women who chewed gum and suck it into the leak stopping the water from escaping.

Well she held forth that Thanksgiving giving even my father who was no slouch as a raconteur a run for his money. Finally sensing a pause one of the other guests who happened to be a nursing educator turned to my brother’s wife and asked her what kind of nursing she did. She began to talk about this fascinating vocation of being on call to fly to auto accidents or other emergencies that needed immediate access to hospital by helicopter. At that point one of our at the time small children created some sort of scene in the living room and I excused myself and got up to see what the commotion was. After a moment or two Ella came slowly into the living room, sat down and said to me, “Who dropped a nickel into her slot?”

Families are funny, all kinds of families. And this is a family holiday, which makes it for some people a difficult day fraught with grief and depression. There is a great deal that could be said about that and has been said, but I want to focus on another

aspect of this remarkable day that always amazes me: the fact that it is a national religious holiday.

I suppose for me the reason that is important is that it calls us to differentiate the God of Jesus Christ, from the God of the nation. To suggest that there is a distinction might well be considered mildly unpatriotic. Especially in times of war it is a dangerous thing to get clear about the God that is assumed and asserted by the National Cult and especially on this its founding commemoration.

As such it begins by invoking the God of the Puritans. Let it be noted that the Pilgrim forebears were escaping from the Church of England whose God was not strict enough, not pure enough, not enough of a stickler about certain things, for their convictions. And in those days such differences were matters of political power and life and death. The Pilgrims were part of a reform movement that was considered to be a threat to the order of English society. Nevertheless, these same Puritans ended up over time so effectively converting the Church of England that much of our own liturgy, though largely received from the less puritan Church of Scotland, still reflects the severe God of the Puritan movement. In contrast to our own the 1662 Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, in use to this day in England and virtually all of its commonwealth partners in the Anglican Communion, is more thoroughly influenced by this movement that was at the height of its influence at the time of that Prayer Book's adoption.

It is also worth noting that the first Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1676, some half century after the supposed "first thanksgiving," comes as a call of gratitude to God for the Massachusetts Bay Colony emerging victorious in "Warr with the Heathen Natives of this land." This is worth noting not because these brave and hearty pioneers should be faulted for engaging in that war of survival but because it roots our memory, habit of celebration, and national narrative of the founding event of Thanksgiving in the context of looking to God for victory in war. And that expression of gratitude is grounded in the particular terms of a covenantal relationship of God's favor and punishment: "we . . . discern that in the midst of his judgements he hath remembered mercy . . . in the day of his sore displeasure against us for our sins."

Our ambivalence is understandable toward the Indians whose initial generosity and welcome rather than their warlike-ness are what we are used to integrate into our celebration. Indeed, our day it is the "Great Spirit," as often as not, at least in Marin, to whom we may find ourselves invited to give thanks on Thanksgiving rather than the Puritan God of judgment and mercy. Yet for much more of our history than we are usually wont to acknowledge, the native people of this land have been the sometimes good, sometimes evil, most often hidden sacrifice or scapegoat of our national myth of origin. But what I want to focus on is the importance of war, of bloodshed, in the development of our national holiday and not on the particular victims of that bloodshed.

Abraham Lincoln was the first to declare Thanksgiving as an annual National Holiday in 1863. Unlike the Puritans Lincoln is not seriously claimed as a Christian.

Nevertheless, he may be the most religious of all our presidents, and he is the one who more than any other has framed our National Religion, our American Civil Religion. For instance he is the one who gave us “in God we trust” on our currency. The Gettysburg Address is the greatest sermon of the American Religious cult and the Civil War crucible in which it was formed. And I want to strongly suggest that that fiery formation was like the children of Israel pouring their gold into the ground—as the story has it—and out came the Golden Calf, while the true God was fuming at their faithlessness up on the mountain with Moses.

Into creating our national holiday Lincoln borrows from and expands on George Washington who after the victory at Saratoga called on the colonies to observe a day of thanksgiving to God, and he enlists the New England tradition as the sacred meal of national communion. After enumerating in his Proclamation the blessings that God has bestowed upon the nation, Lincoln continues, “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.” For Lincoln the sin had been originally the breaking of the union, by 1863 it had become the sin of slavery for which God was justly angry.

The preachers of both North and South, enthralled by a kind of righteous blood lust, appealed to God for victory over their co-religionists, their brothers and sisters in Christ, on the other side. One of America’s greatest preachers referred to the overwhelming sacrifice as “blood poured on the Altar of the Nation.” It was in this unimaginably horrific context that Lincoln, seeking a religious pretext for abandoning what was called “proportionality” in the conflict and motivating the Nation to “total war,” drafted into service not only the rhetoric of the founders and their Calvinist God, but also the evangelical fervor about the abolition of slavery by his emancipation proclamation, a fervor that had been at its lowest ebb at the beginning of the war.

Thus it remains that our national purposes, whether of war or peace, are harnessed to the sacred observance of God’s blessing in our Thanksgiving Holiday. Yet, it remains a curiosity how a country that claims freedom of religion can so wholeheartedly appropriate—without so much as a peep from the ACLU—as one of its two rituals of national identity and renewal a sacred covenant meal. It is like the Passover feast of our national religion. And yet the God who thereby is remembered, and to whom at least a cursory expression of gratitude is to be given, is the author of the national destiny currently envisioned by those in power. Can that God be construed as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ? And can that God be identified with the God we worship here tonight?

When George Bush claims that God told him to invade Iraq, can he possibly be referring to the “Abba” of Jesus Christ who tells us in the passage we read in Luke not to worry about the necessities of this life but instead to pursue the rule and righteousness of God who lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust? I fear not. After all, Jesus who is the perfect expression of that God said just a few verses earlier: “ You cannot serve God and

wealth.” And a few verses later: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It must become the faithful mission of the Church of Jesus Christ to point out to those who claim the God of the Bible the discrepancies between the god they too often presume to claim and invoke, the god of enemies and friends, the god of life and death, the god of war and national identity and international power, that is the god of this world, and the God of Jesus Christ. That God as the letter of James calls him is the “Father of Light,” “with whom there is no variation or shadow.” Or as John writes in his first letter, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” God is not the God war but only of peace. He is not a God of sacrificial offerings whose will is changed or whose favor is secured by the spilling of blood. He is not the God of death but only God of life and of “the living,” the God to whom all souls are alive. It’s time we get clear about which God we worship and it’s time that we call our nation to the worship of the true God. Let this Eucharist be your thanksgiving to the true God and let it strengthen you to stand against religious nationalism and the claims of American exceptionalism and messianism that so often capture and enthrall us in times of war.