

“Giving Thanks”

The family Thanksgivings of my childhood were not the large family gatherings of a Norman Rockwell painting. Our grandparents on both sides lived close by but we did not visit for Thanksgiving that was reserved for Christmas. Instead, we spent the day in family activities. Mom would be cooking in the kitchen, except for when the Macy’s parade was on TV. She loves a parade. Dad and us children would be in the garage cracking walnuts. The subdivision used to be an orchard and there were still walnut trees producing nuts. We cracked and picked walnuts for the fruit cakes Mom would bake for Christmas. After lunch it was time for football. These were never exciting games with teams we cared about, but my Dad would watch anyway. When we kids got bored we would throw the football in the yard. At supper time we had our Thanksgiving meal. After which, as we got older, it would be the responsibility of the children to do the cleanup.

Thanksgiving for a good harvest go back millennia. People gave thanks to God for the bounty that insured life would last through the winter. There was a cornucopia of vegetables and fruits that would be stored or preserved to get people through the cold months. There might be a bit of excess to eat since some foods were too ripe or too fragile for storage. Supermarkets offering food, especially out of season food year round, did not exist. People relied on what they grew in their gardens and on their farms, and they grew foods that would keep.

Thanksgiving celebrations were tied to the land and the bounty it provided. People knew that there was much more than hard work and ingenuity that brought forth a good harvest. Weather, insects, disease, and rain are out of human control. People gave thanks with the understanding that it is God who provides.

In contrast, the stereotypical contemporary Thanksgiving Day feast is a profound statement of self-sufficiency. We say to ourselves that we do not need anyone—community, family, or God—we have it all well in hand thank you very much. The gifts of God including life, bounty, and hope do not enter into our thinking. But when challenges arise we are bereft.

This year wars rage in Israel, Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine to name the most high-profile conflicts. Noncombatants on all sides bear the brunt of the misery. Threats of genocide come from the most unlikely. The other is supposed to be so evil that nothing short of utterly destroying them will suffice. Humanitarian crises abound as civilians suffer without sufficient food, clean water, and the most basic of medical care. Here in the US we avoid talking to each other for fear of getting into a political argument that ends a friendship. These challenging times ought to, if we are humble, bring us back to the sense that God is all that is true and abiding. Instead, more and more Americans do not identify with a religion, and attendance at religious services, even among fundamentalists, is shrinking.

This Thanksgiving Day I urge you to be like the Americans who celebrated the first day of national thanksgiving in November of 1863. They were in the midst of a war that threatened to end the American Experiment. The outcome of the war was still uncertain. It did not appear that there was much to be thankful for in the midst of so much death and destruction, but they gave thanks that God had given them lives, hearts, and souls to dedicate to the cause of freedom for all people. This Thanksgiving Day let us acknowledge our dependence on God, and rededicate ourselves to “do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God?” [Micah 6:8]