

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2018

A woman was picking through the frozen turkeys at the grocery store for Thanksgiving Day, but couldn't find one big enough for her family. She asked a stock boy, "Do these turkeys get any bigger?" "No, ma'am. They're dead."ⁱ

It's difficult to believe that we are at Thanksgiving week already. Usually I preach on the lectionary for the day, but today I thought, well, with it being so close to Thanksgiving, I'd spend my time with you this morning speaking about this especially U.S. way (I say U.S. because Canada has a day of Thanksgiving also) of commemorating the meal that the early Pilgrims shared with the Wampanoag Indians in 1621. Of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower in 1620, only 53 were alive a year later, but 90 Wampanoags showed up for a three-day celebration the following autumn, bringing with them much of the food.ⁱⁱ In 1863 Abraham Lincoln called for a national day of Thanksgiving, in hopes that such a festival might bring some unity between the north and south. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt declared the fourth Thursday in November to be a national Thanksgiving holiday. We could use a new proclamation that seeks to unite us today. It will be interesting to see what comes from the White House in the next two weeks that might call for and accomplish any kind of unity in this currently divided nation.

I was curious to see what scholars thought about the best presidential proclamations. Chris Field, Managing Editor of the conservative publication, *The Blaze*, wrote in 2014 that he thought the best were written by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and George W. Bush. The first four are well-known. But this one, by George W. Bush in 2001, surprised me with its thought process, compassion, and clarity. He writes " ... During these extraordinary times, we find particular assurance from our Thanksgiving tradition, which reminds us that we, as a people and individually, always have reason to hope and trust in God, despite great adversity. ...

As we recover from the terrible tragedies of September 11, Americans of every belief and heritage give thanks to God for the many blessings we enjoy as a free, faithful, and fair-minded land. ... And let us give thanks for the millions of people

of faith who have opened their hearts to those in need with love and prayer, bringing us a deeper unity and stronger resolve.

In thankfulness and humility, we acknowledge, especially now, our dependence on One greater than ourselves. On this day of Thanksgiving, let our thanksgiving be revealed in the compassionate support we render to our fellow citizens who are grieving unimaginable loss; and let us reach out with care to those in need of food, shelter, and words of hope. May Almighty God, who is our refuge and our strength in this time of trouble, watch over our homeland, protect us, and grant us patience, resolve, and wisdom in all that is to come.”ⁱⁱⁱ

One of my favorite proclamations and among the most famous written, is that of Elbridge Gerry, Governor of Massachusetts in 1811. Gerry was one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Framers’ Bill of Rights. His letter to the commonwealth begins, ““The Lord reigneth, let the earth,” let all creation, “rejoice.” The innumerable blessings conferred by our divine benefactor, during the present and in every preceding year, on the inhabitants of this Commonwealth, proclaim their duty, to offer to Him, at all times, with unbounded gratitude, their cheerful acknowledgments of His perpetual favors. To implore, with the deepest humility, His pardon of their multiplied and aggravated offenses, to resolve, with unfeigned sincerity, on an implicit obedience to His sovereign will, and to supplicate, with true devotion, His indispensable aid, in every religious, moral, and lawful pursuit.

Impressed by these *considerations*, and by the usage of our venerable Ancestors, at the close of harvest, I have thought fit, by the advice of the council, to appoint, and I do hereby appoint THURSDAY, the TWENTY-FIRST of NOVEMBER next, to be a day of Public THANKSGIVING, PRAISE, and PRAYER, throughout this Commonwealth; calling on and requesting the ministers and people of every religious denomination, to meet on that day in their respective sanctuaries, that with unanimity and fervor, we may present our unfeigned praises for all the mercies we have received of our Bountiful Creator, who has continued to us the inestimable blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ, blessings not confined to time, but extended to *eternity*, who has confirmed to us our federal and State constitutions, which secure the enjoyment of our lives, liberties and property, who continues to bless us with a National Government and Administration, whose wisdom, virtue, and firmness have not been circumvented, corrupted or appalled by the arts, seductions, or threats of foreign or domestic foes, but whose patriotic

efforts have uniformly and manifestly resulted from an ardent desire to promote the public welfare and happiness, who has not punished our ungrateful murmurs, discontents and other crimes, as He has those of distant nations, by war and its dire effects; but has preserved to us peace, the greatest of national blessings, who has favored us with a Clergy, (with few exceptions,) whose conduct, is influenced by the mild, benign and benevolent principles of the Gospel; and whose example is a constant admonition to such pastors and professors of Christianity, as are too much under the guidance of passion, prejudice, and worldly delusion, Who has enabled us from unavoidable spoliations to derive permanent benefits, by gradually diminishing our dependence on foreign markets, for necessary supplies; by rapidly increasing our manufactures thereof; and by thus preventing in future the plunder of such property by avaricious nations, who has not visited us, as He has other countries, with plague, pestilence or famine; but has kindly preserved to us a great degree of health, and crowned with plenty the labors of our industrious husbandmen, Who has increased the martial ardor and discipline of our militia, and enables us to smile at the menaces of mighty potentates, Who continues to us the due administration of justice, the full and free exercise of our civil religious rights, and the numerous blessing which have resulted from them, Who has prospered in a remarkable degree our Schools, Academies and Colleges; those inestimable sources of public information and happiness, who has protected so great a portion of the property of our merchants, when exposed to the depredations of perfidious governments, Who has granted success to our enterprising fishermen, prospered our ingenious mechanics, and loaded us with His boundless munificence.”^{iv}

It goes on for another paragraph or two, that are rather mundane, and ends “And I do earnestly recommend to the Citizens of the Commonwealth to enjoy this festival rationally, and to abstain from unnecessary labor, and from recreations inconsistent with their duty on that day.” That was sage advice, and worthy of consideration. My favorite portions of this proclamation deal with the clergy, “who are too much under the guidance of passion, prejudice, and worldly delusion;”and I am very fond of the part that asks for “success for our enterprising fishermen (well it is Massachusetts, after all...). Giving thanks for “Those Schools, Academies and Colleges; those inestimable sources of public information and happiness” is another fine thought for the day.^v Certainly all these gentlemen writers had put some thought into what they were writing.

But when I think of Thanksgiving, as good as the proclamations are, I remember with fondness the Indian writer and director Gurinda Chadha's ode to this infamous meal with her movie *What's Cooking?* On Thanksgiving day, four ethnically diverse families -- Vietnamese, Latino, Jewish, and African American — gather for the traditional meal. Each family has its own distinct way of cooking the traditional holiday meal and its own set of problems, all of which make their way home and to the dinner table at the Thanksgiving meal. The movie shows the challenges in what we refer to as 'ethnic' families when it comes to maneuvering within the confines of what has been traditionally thought of as meals of white privilege, totally ignoring the fact that "ethnic groups" have been celebrating meals of their own kind for more than 10,000 years. But the emphasis in this movie is on the present, and what makes up a Thanksgiving meal for one (a McDonald's hamburger) may not be to the taste or liking of others (pho, traditional Vietnamese soup). Plus we get to see how Thanksgiving may not always be the meal we had hoped it might be. The joy at the end of this movie is when a loud noise brings each family out of their doors, and they realize for the first time that they all live on the same four-stop corner, yet had never taken the time to get to know one another. This outdoor encounter begins the process. *The New York Times* movie critic Dana Stevens says it best when speaking to the impact of the entire movie: "It's a meal you may feel you've eaten before, but you nonetheless walk away stuffed and happy."^{vi}

Of course, Thanksgiving Day would not be complete, at least to my way of thinking, without words of Scripture. The usual choice is The Sermon on the Mount, the blessed ares and happy ares of the first century. They are presented as lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and the grasses of the field - - lithe things about which we should have no worry - - a trinity that represents God's care for all creation. For that is the true message of this feast day: "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed" says *Psalms 126*. And though they are not overbearing, they do arrive to us with their own forceful grace, and we arrive before God just as we were made, a part of the created order, ready to carry on in our work within the kingdom.

So what are you doing this Thanksgiving? is what we'll be hearing the next 10 days or so. The typical meal, football (no doubt), visitors, and a celebratory glass of champagne, lots of hugs to go around because everyone is once again together. Remember in your thoughts and prayers those who have no place to

go, or those who for whatever reason will be alone. Pray for peace and understanding among all the peoples of the world. It is interesting to me that a U.S. holiday has begun to take root as a world-wide feast day, as on Thursday folks in every country will gather for a community meal, like Jesus did. “For when he had given thanks, he took the bread, lifted it up, blessed it and told the disciples to do this henceforth in remembrance of him. That they did, and we have since.”

Here’s an old poem I found among my mother’ papers: May your stuffing be tasty, May your turkey plump, May your potatoes and gravy, Have nary a lump. May your yams be delicious, And your pies take the prize, And may your **Thanksgiving** dinner Stay off your thighs!

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://www.theholidayspot.com/thanksgiving/jokes.htm#xB84RTqI5S05XSof.99>

ⁱⁱ *Sunday and Seasons Preaching Year B 2018*, 295.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2014/11/25/top-five-thanksgiving-proclamations>

^{iv} <https://wallbuilders.com/proclamation-thanksgiving-day-1811-massachusetts/#>

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi}

<https://www.bing.com/search?q=movie+lanie+kazan%2C+kyra+degwick%2C+jlianna+margulies&form=EDGEAR&q=s=PF&cvid=f873f20e6eb54441b4d9eed933971d9&cc=US&setlang=en-US>