

It is often forgotten, amid the familiar stories of William Bradford, Massasoit, and the other original characters from Plymouth Rock, that it was actually President Lincoln who set apart this day of thanksgiving as a national holiday. And President Lincoln did this in a proclamation on October 3, 1863, in the midst of a ravaging Civil War. Lincoln's proclamation is an eloquent reminder that even in the midst of war there is much for which we might be thankful. But what strikes me most forcefully is the way in which Lincoln urges a spirit of thanksgiving that is under girded by reverent humility and penitence – qualities sorely needed today.

*The year that is drawing towards its close, proclaimed Lincoln, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.*

...

*I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged....*

This is a powerful lesson, that our national comportment should be one of deep thankfulness, and that our gratitude should be under girded by reverent humility and ongoing penitence, lest our thankfulness should lead to neglect of those less fortunate. For, if we neglect them, we neglect God.

And there is another powerfully relevant lesson for our nation that derives not from Lincoln's proclamation of 1863 but from the original experience of the pilgrims in 1621.

According to Nathaniel Philbrick, the author of the recent bestselling book, *Mayflower*, the first Thanksgiving Day was probably celebrated in late September or October of 1621, and the pilgrims' feast was likely a kind of "Harvest Feast" of the sort that was customary in the old world they had left behind.

And what was most remarkable about this Harvest Feast was the fact that the pilgrims were only able to celebrate in this way because of the help they received from the Indians. In fact, the heroes of this story are not only the pilgrims but the Native Americans who kept the pilgrims alive. In a sense, the First Thanksgiving was a celebration of interdependence. But when the next generation of leaders came along and forgot the lessons of interdependence, how important it was to care for one another, then a fierce and bloody war broke out in which the pilgrims themselves became savages.

There are many lessons we can learn from the experiences of the pilgrims of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and surely chief among them would be the importance of living with and caring for people who are not like us, in a spirit of mutual responsibility as children of the same God, however we might name or worship that God.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes a compelling case for understanding this concern as the paramount concern of our day. “Can we live together?” he asks. “Can we make space for one another? Can we overcome long histories of estrangement and bitterness? ... Can we recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image?” (*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 17) “We need,” writes Sacks, “a theology of difference: why no one civilization has the right to impose itself on others by force: why God asks us to respect the freedom and dignity of those not like us.” (p. 21)

It is indeed an urgent concern in our day, and the very survival of our planet may well depend on a growing recognition among human beings of the interdependence of us all, as well as a growing regard for the dignity of every human being, regardless of creed or race, as common bearers of the Divine image, utterly equal in God’s eyes.

Some would consider this the most important of the lessons from that first Thanksgiving Day and the experience of the pilgrims and Native Americans in 1621.

For me, the third and final lesson of this great national feast of ours is not about national compartment or the relations of peoples and religions. Instead, it’s a lesson about how we might wake up each morning, and it derives from a story I have told every Thanksgiving Day for nearly 20 years. It’s a true story of an old woman whom the theologian Fulton Ousler had known, a woman who had been born into slavery on the Eastern shore of Maryland. Her former master had thought it a great joke to christen her Anna Maria Cecily Sophia Virginia Avalon Thessalonians.

Ousler remembered eating with Anna as she sat in his home with her hard old black hands folded, praying, “Much obliged, dear Lord, for my vittles.”

“But Anna,” he pointed out, “you’d get your vittles whether you thanked the Lord or not.”

“Sure,” she responded, “but it makes everything taste better to be thankful.”

“You know,” she went on, “it’s a funny thing about being thankful, it’s a game an old colored preacher taught me to play. It’s looking for things to be thankful for. You don’t know how many of them you pass right by, unless you go looking for them. Take this morning for instance. I wake up and I lay there wondering what I got to be thankful for now. With my husband dead and having to work every day I can’t think of anything. What must the good Lord think of me, His child? But the honest truth is, I just can’t think of a thing to thank him for. And then what do you think? My daughter comes and opens the bedroom door, so from the kitchen comes the smell of coffee. Much obliged, dear Lord, for the coffee and a daughter to have it ready for an old woman when she wakes up.

“Now for a while I have to do housework. It’s hard to find anything to thank God for in housework. But when I come to the mantelpiece to dust, there is Little Boy Blue. I’ve had that little china boy for many years. I was a slave when I got it as my one Christmas present. I love that little boy. Much obliged, dear Lord, for Little Boy Blue.”

“And almost everything I dust reminds me of something. Even the pictures that hang on our cracked, unpainted wall. It’s like a visit with my family who have all left this world. They look at me, and I look at them, and there are so many happy things to remember. Much obliged, dear Lord, for my memory. And then I go for a walk downtown to buy a loaf of bread and cheese for our dinner. I look in all the windows, so many pretty things.”

Fulton Ousler broke in, “But Anna, you can’t buy any of those things. You have no money.”

“Oh, but I can play – play dolls. I think of your ma and sister how they would look in those dresses and I have a lot of fun. Much obliged dear Lord for playing in my mind, it’s a kind of happiness.

“Just like once I got caught in the rain,” she said. “It was fun for me. I’ve always heard about people’s shower baths, I’ve never had one, but now I have one. You know God is just giving heaven away to people all day long. I’ve been to the park and seen the gardens, but you know what I like? The old bush in my back yard by the railroad track, but better. One rose will fill you with all the sweetness you can stand.”

Ousler ended his story with these words. “The soul of long dead Anna was a big soul, big enough to see God everywhere and she taught me a great deal about life; for I will never forget when word came to me from the dingy street where she lived, that Anna was dying. I remember driving in a cab and standing by her bedside. She was in deep pain and her hard old hands were knotted together in a desperate clutch. Poor old woman, what had she to be thankful for now? She opened her eyes and looked at me. “Much obliged, dear Lord, for such fine friends.” She never spoke again, except in my heart but she speaks to me every day there and I’m obliged, dear Lord, for that.”

The third lesson of Thanksgiving Day is this. On any given day, we awaken to a world that is full of reasons for cynicism, sadness or mourning. But that same day contains an equal number of reasons for thanksgiving. We can choose. And the choice is between a life of abundance and thanksgiving or scarcity and despair.

That our great nation’s comportment should always include a spirit of reverent humility and penitence, that all nations and peoples are interdependent regardless of how we variously name or experience God, and that the reasons for pessimism on any given day are always set before us alongside an equal number of reasons for gratitude, requiring us to choose... may this Thanksgiving Day yield these lessons and more, bringing our proud nation to its knees in gratitude laced with duty to the poor, allowing us to see the dignity and divinity in people who are different from us, and helping us to say, very simply, much obliged dear Lord, for all that has been and all that is to be.