

WHAT THANKSGIVING MEANS TO ME

If I were to pass out slips of paper and ask each one of you to put down the first word that you thought of when I said, "thanksgiving," I wonder what the results would be? I think I can predict what I should find on many a piece of paper. A goodly number of you would put down "vacation!" Many others would write, "turkey". A few would put down "pilgrims". And I expect that there would be some who would write the word, "God". As a matter of fact no one word can describe Thanksgiving. For myself, I should have to write four words, because my idea of Thanksgiving has all of the words which you have written. At least I can use your words as symbols of my ideas. Now I have arranged these four words so that each one begins with the letter "F". I was going to call them the "four F's" until I remembered that during the war a 4F was someone who was unfit for service. Well--let's re-activate the 4F's, retrain them, fix them up and use them. Here they are--

That's right--the first one is FOOD. Thanksgiving is a feast day. We ought to make it just as hilarious as possible. We ought to have some sort of a special meal. But we must be careful that we do not allow this to give us a false notion of what happiness really is. Do you know the legend of the happy man? A king was ill. He consulted all the doctors and all were baffled and could find no cure. In despair he turned to his jester who declared he would be cured only if he could sleep in the shirt of a happy man. Servants were sent everywhere but the task they had imagined would be so easy was very difficult. Every man they found had his unhappiness. Finally they found one man as happy as the day was long--strangely enough he was very poor. They explained to him their errand and offered a large price for his shirt. To their dismay they found that he didn't own a shirt! There is a lot of truth in that. People are trying to tell you that happiness consists in what you have -- it does not! The first Pilgrim feast was meager indeed in comparison with what any one of you will have on Thursday. Their meal was a feast because they had been starving and were thankful that there was enough of a harvest to keep them alive.

The second word which describes Thanksgiving for me is FAMILY. Thanksgiving has become a time for families to get together. The early New England thanksgivings were community meals and there are still some towns in New England which observe this custom. Most of us gather, however, with our families on Thanksgiving. That is my earliest memory of Thanksgiving Day. It was the day when we went to an Aunt's house with all the other relatives and had us a real party. We ought to guard this phase of Thanksgiving. Because of the make up of our society it is becoming increasingly difficult for families to have fellowship together. I heard of a husband and wife the other day who never went out together except the time when the gas stove exploded!

Isn't it strange that so often we have the notion that the perfect family lives down the road or across the street? I once heard a story about a boy who at sunset would look across from the top of a hill where there was a house with windows of clear gold and diamonds. One day he had a holiday and he made up his mind that he would go across the valley, climb the other hill and see this beautiful house. When he got to the other hill, however, he could not find the house with the golden windows. Another boy came along and he asked him if he knew where it was. "Sure", said this boy, "come along and I'll show you." So he took him up the hill a little farther, pointed out across the valley, and sure enough there it was—but it was his ~~own~~ home, the windows of which were reflecting the sun. He went home shouting, "I have a house with windows of gold and diamonds!" Every family ought to be able to find satisfaction and happiness having a good time together. Thanksgiving means that for me.

The third word which describes Thanksgiving for me is FOREFATHERS. Here is where the Pilgrims come in!

O God beneath Thy guiding hand
Our exiled fathers crossed the sea;
And when they trod the wintry strand,
With prayer and psalm they worshiped Thee.

Laws, freedom, truth, and faith in God
Came with those exiles o'er the waves;
And where their pilgrim feet have trod,
The God they trusted guards their graves.

It is good for us to remember the heritage of our country and to be thankful for it. Today all the values which those Pilgrims stood for are being attacked. They can be preserved only by you. I think I can illustrate this by reminding you about the woman who is really responsible for Thanksgiving Day becoming a national holiday. I wonder if you know her name--it is rarely mentioned. Her name was Sarah Hale. "She came from Boston to Philadelphia to edit a woman's magazine. She had always lived in New England and had observed Thanksgiving Day, and she did not want the custom to die out, so she sent letters to all the governors of the State and Territories, asking them to set apart the last Thursday in November for a national Thanksgiving Day. At first they did not pay any attention to her, but year after year she wrote, until finally a few responded to her request. During the Civil War the custom lagged, but Mrs. Hale was persistent. She would not allow it to be forgotten, so she kept writing to the governors and others about it. After the battle of Gettysburg she wrote to President Lincoln and suggested that he appoint a national holiday of thanksgiving. This he did and ever since then each President has set apart the last Thursday in November for this purpose."

I think this shows what an individual can do to preserve a tradition of value and to hand it down to others. I am thinking now not only of the Pilgrims but of the whole span of our history down into the present and our hope for the future. You and I are a part of the American ideal, of the American Dream, and this holiday of Thanksgiving is a great national holiday when we need to take stock of the treasure which we have and to be thankful for it.

But we can have no real Thanksgiving without the fourth word--which is FAITH. This is not only a feast, a family gathering, a national holiday, it is a religious festival as well. They came together on that first Thanksgiving to give thanks to God. There is an old legend which tells of a man who was wandering through a wood when he came upon a clump of little blue flowers that we call forget-me-nots. He bent over them and was surprised when they spoke to him and told him where he might find a great treasure, if he picked some flowers. He natched some and hurried on! Presently he came to a cave filled with glittering treasure. In hist haste he dropped the flowers and rushed toward the treasure--then a great stone dropped in

in front of the opening, closing it forever." This is a parable of the danger of ungratitude. It is a little hard for us today to connect our lives with God. Yet He is the source of our lives. In our haste to grasp the pleasures and the treasure he has provided we often forget Him. Thanksgiving expresses not only our faith in our country it should also express our faith in and our thankfulness to God. This assembly is not enough—Thursday morning you should go to the church of your choice as an expression of this faith in God. Thanksgiving can be a very meaningless and empty holiday with God left out. It should be a reminder to us of our obligations To Him.