

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF THANKSGIVING



I. Origins

With apologies to the Pilgrims, the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States are more complicated than most people think. Was the first Thanksgiving meal in present-day Massachusetts, complete with buckled, wide-brimmed hats, in 1621? Or was it an English celebration (different hats!) on the shores of Virginia, in 1619? Or how about a Spanish gathering in what became Texas, in 1598 — or Florida, in 1565?

The reasons for those celebrations varied, of course. The English colonists in Virginia, for example, declared the day a commemoration of their arrival, thanking God for safe passage across a forbidding ocean; likewise, the Spanish explorers thanked God for survival. On the other hand, after a 1637 massacre of Native Americans, the governor of Plymouth wrote that Thanksgiving Days would be “in honor of the bloody victory.” In 1789, President George Washington declared a national Day of Thanksgiving to thank God for the birth of a new nation. And the current annual date in late November — which is far too late, after all, for a “harvest festival” in New England! — wasn’t established

until Abraham Lincoln's declaration in 1863, explicitly giving thanks for the Union's military efforts in the Civil War.

II. Thanksgiving Today

So the holiday we inherit is a complex, morally ambivalent amalgam of different kinds of gratitude: for good harvest, for safe passage, for colonial conquest, for military victory. All of which only sharpens the question, *How will we celebrate Thanksgiving today?*

Remembering this history of immigration and cross-cultural connection and conflict, we may give thanks for the dazzling diversity of this land, including and especially Native American communities. Giving thanks in this way, our gratitude can spur us to reach out and work together to create a more just and equitable world.

Likewise, remembering the holiday's links to war, we may give thanks for times of peace: in our hearts, homes, neighborhoods, and between nations. Remembering the holiday's links to creation, we may give thanks for that nourishing abundance. Here, too, our gratitude can serve as inspiration to redouble our efforts to be genuine peacemakers, serve the hungry in our neighborhoods, and care for God's good Earth, all creatures great and small.

III. The Difference Gratitude Makes

But there's perhaps no better day than Thanksgiving to reflect on the astounding power of gratitude itself — and accordingly, to commit ourselves to cultivating it more intentionally in the coming year.

If we think of "gratitude" primarily as a kind of duty to discharge (*Now remember to write that thank-you note!*), we're missing the boat entirely, effectively reducing one of life's wonders to mere good manners. On the contrary, gratitude is vital force in the world, a profoundly dignifying act that builds relationships, communities, and healthy human hearts.

The science on this subject is overwhelming: in study after study, gratitude has been shown to lead to stronger relationships, better sleep, lower blood pressure, fewer trips to the doctor, fewer depressive symptoms, more patience, and more perseverance, among other benefits (check out these study summaries [here](#) and [here](#)). In one particularly intriguing study, gratitude turns out to be a powerful antidote to the “Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry,” our all-too-common tendency to focus on the obstacles in our lives (headwinds) and overlook blessings (tailwinds), an imbalance that over time leads to feeling aggrieved and resentful. In short, focusing on headwinds breeds bitterness; focusing on tailwinds breeds appreciation — and the act of thanksgiving helps call our attention to the winds at our backs.

IV. Becoming More Grateful

OK, so gratitude is powerful — but how to make more of it in our lives? It turns out that some of the most effective tools for increasing gratitude are also some of the simplest and most familiar. First, the basic act of not just counting our blessings but also recording them in a form we can revisit later — say, in a journal or notebook — has been shown to significantly enhance feelings of thankfulness over time.

Second, another simple action has been shown to be even more effective: writing a letter of thanks to a friend, family member, acquaintance, or even a stranger. That’s right — thank-you notes can change your life! Indeed, we should reconceive the humble thank-you note not merely as a way to inform others about how grateful we are, but also as *a way to help strengthen how grateful we are in the first place*.

And a third practice isn’t only effective, it’s downright fun, even and especially in a time of pandemic: connecting with a friend once a week for coffee (or tea, or lunch - by phone, online, or on a physically-distanced walk), and intentionally devoting at least part of the conversation to sharing what we’re thankful for these days. When it comes to gratitude, just “saying it out loud” to someone we like and respect, not to mention hearing what they’re thankful

for, is a powerful step toward noticing — and more deeply experiencing — the blessings in our lives.

V. A Graceful Life

The power of these practices makes sense: one of our most precious treasures is our time-and-attention, and how we spend that treasure will directly determine the health of our hearts (“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” ([Matthew 6:21](#))). Will we spend it all focusing on “headwinds,” thereby creating the perfect petri dish for growing resentments and narratives of grievance? Or will we spend it focusing on “tailwinds,” thereby nourishing the soil for growing joy and narratives of appreciation? Gratitude journals, thank-you notes, and thankful conversations are simple, powerful, effective tools for investing our time-and-attention wisely.

And so is prayer. Viewed from this angle, prayer is a kind of spoken gratitude journal, an intimate thank-you note or thankful conversation with God. And so is worship. Properly practiced, worship is an elaborate exercise — a whole gymnasium! — for cultivating thanks and praise, and at its best, the result is a swirl of palpable tailwinds, amazement, and joy. And so is the Eucharist (from the Greek for “thanksgiving”), the Lord’s Supper, the Communion meal. Gathered around a table of bounty, remembering an old story, giving thanks to God for safe passage, for life, for peace, and for the strength to continue the pilgrimage anew.

In the end, then, we’re “pilgrims” after all. So start (or revisit) a gratitude journal. Try writing a simple thank-you note once a week. Connect with a friend for coffee and (thankful) conversation. Recommit to a practice of prayer. And let this year’s Thanksgiving be not just a day of gratitude, but a springboard into a new life of gratitude, that most human and humanizing of gestures, the most graceful of all social graces.

Happy Thanksgiving!
The SALT Team