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LORD, GIVE US GRATEFUL HEARTS

Have you ever imagined yourself as a Pilgrim at the beginning of the Thanksgiving feast 382 years ago in 1621? Do you see yourself sitting at a table well laden with the fruits of an abundant harvest? Well, if you're a woman you won't be sitting. You'll be standing behind men who are partaking with relish of all that is spread before them.

The exact date of this New England feast is not known. It was clearly in autumn and probably late in the season. A firsthand account of the event by Edward Winslow relates, "Our corn [i.e. wheat] did prove well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good, but our peas not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun parched them in the blossom." No peas, alas. Cranberries were available but there was no way to sweeten them. The Indian corn would not have been on the cob, but cornmeal that could be kept for the challenging cold months ahead. Meat became available when "our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors."

An invitation was extended to neighboring Indians who arrived with their chief Massasoit. The ninety who came "for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are far from want" (*Mourt's Relation: a Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, ch. 6).

Even earlier in 1607, English settlers with their Abenaki friends had held a harvest feast combined with a prayer gathering in Maine near the Kennebec River. The proposed colony was not able to continue. Long before that on May 23, 1548 hopeful Spanish colonists held an observance of thanksgiving for finding food, water, and land their animals could pasture on in the Texas Panhandle.

Gratitude is rooted in our mortal nature, a feeling that rises within us when we recognize ourselves blessed in a particular way. Autumn and spring are especially singled out for festivities of thankfulness—one in anticipation of winter and the other when winter is safely passed. Harvest festivities are recorded in the annals of many ancient peoples: Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Chinese and Egyptians.

If a new dawn seems to carry with it relief from danger or a special guarantee of good fortune, the human heart spontaneously sings a canticle of gratefulness. Heinrich Heine wrote, "Oh, 'tis Love that makes us grateful, Oh, 'tis love that makes us rich!" (*O, die Liebe macht uns selig*)

A father or mother shows children how to respond when something arrives in any gifted form. This habit of expressing gratitude shapes the young consciousness to what deserves a smile and words of appreciation. Thus we learn to give credit to others for reaching out to us in a benevolent way. "I thank you. I do thank you." We

become more awake to the touch of goodness as we recognize the one making it possible.

God Who has created the beautiful world of Maine deserves to hear us proclaim the delight we experience for all laid out by a generous Creator. A first lesson in prayer for a very young child can be based on pointing to the beauty of flowers or water in so many different forms. Then the little one is urged to repeat words of praise, "I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart" (Ps 111:1). A sunset, a rising moon, even the playfulness of a new puppy brings forth this expression of gratitude to God. Shakespeare assigns these lines to King Henry VI, speaking before his courtiers, "O Lord! That lends me life,/ Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness" (Part II, Act 1, Sc.1, Line 19).

A grateful spirit does not shrivel up, held in a self-made prison of its own absorption. The movement of thankfulness extends beyond our private world to make contact with that which is outside ourselves. We turn to others to express our gratitude for whatever we have received from them. This brings sunshine to our day and to theirs. When we may be angry with another, it is helpful to reflect on that person and see something we can be grateful for in him or her. Then our wrath simmers down until we can deal in a more quiet manner with what provokes us.

On the fourth Thursday of November, we ask God to arouse us to a new awareness of all we should be grateful for. This will not burden our hearts but make them rise to find comfort and gladness in life's offerings. "Anything you do, in word or deed, do in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Col 3:17). We remember the pilgrims in their gathering so long ago; and all of us today--women and men together--sit down with them in a thankfulness that transcends time.

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