

Observing Thanksgiving Day

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President Oaks, my fellow colleagues, students of Brigham Young University, they say that confession is good for the soul. I don't know what the state of my soul is, but I'm confessing that this frightens me. My students should gain some feeling of security that even the old man can get into trouble!

As I've been preparing to respond to this invitation to speak, finding it difficult to reach a decision about what I should say, I was reminded of some lines by the great East Indian poet Tagor. "I've spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung." I hope for all our sakes that I will not be in that situation today.

History of Thanksgiving Day

The human family has always followed the practice of special days to acknowledge God's goodness. So it was that the Plymouth colonists celebrated their second winter spent in the New World. The first dreadful winter in Massachusetts had killed nearly half of the members of the colony, but hope sprang anew the late summer of 1621. The corn harvest brought rejoicing, and the forests and streams were abundant with wild game and fish. The colonists understood the environment better

the second season than they had the first. They found that they could harmonize their lives in this cold, bitter climate. Governor William Bradford decreed that December 13, 1621, be set aside as a day of feasting and prayer to demonstrate the gratitude the colonists felt toward God. The women of the colony spent days preparing for the feast. Foods were boiled, baked, and roasted. The children were kept very busy turning roasts on spits or iron rods in front of the open fires. More than eighty Indians attended the feast. The Indians brought wild turkeys and venison as their share. The tables were set outdoors, and all the people sat around the combined tables like one large family. Prayers, sermons, and songs of praise accompanied the feasting. Three days were devoted to the Thanksgiving, and then the Indians returned to the forests and the colonists to their toil.

Word of the Plymouth celebration traveled to other New England towns and colonies. Then Thanksgiving Day became a custom. Sporadic attempts were made to formulize a special day. In 1789 President George Washington was urged

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by the Congress to proclaim a national holiday. I was struck forcibly by the content of his message, how aptly it suits today. May I read it:

Whereas, it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and whereas, both Houses of Congress, have by their joint Committee requested me "to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer," to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great & glorious Being who is the Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we then all unite in rendering unto Him our service and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the People of this Country . . . ; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His Providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness. . . .

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord & Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our National and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several & relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a government of wise, just, & constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed & obeyed; to protect & guide all sovereigns & nations and to bless them with good governments, Peace & Concord; to promote the knowledge & practice of true religion & virtue . . . ; & generally to grant

unto all mankind such a degree of temporal Prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

It was a woman, Mrs. Sarah Hale, editor of *Godey's Ladies' Book*, who spent thirty years promoting the setting of a legal Thanksgiving Day. She wrote and published repeated pleas to the general public and wrote letters to the various presidents. Finally, in 1863, President Lincoln issued a proclamation setting aside the last Thursday of November in that year as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father. It was not until 1941 that Congress finally ruled Thanksgiving Day would be a legal holiday.

Time for Gratitude

It's now some 354 years since Governor Bradford decreed a Thanksgiving Day, and I want to ask, "How do we value and deserve and observe this day? Do we remember only the feasting?" I think not. One of the great human sins is ingratitude. Surely we have not grown so cynical that we cannot have the spiritual insight to observe the "prayer and praise" part of the day. Virginia Oliver says: "Thanksgiving is a time for remembering—remembering the good gifts of every day, the countless blessings that are ever ours; for remembering Thanksgiving Days that are past, the memories of families and friends, remembering at each time this day draws near the hearts of mankind, joined in grateful praise."

*Did I forget to thank thee, Lord,
For things that may seem small:
A flower by the wayside,
A wild bird's lovely call,*

*For all the daily happenings
That we call commonplace—
For autumn and for sunsets
And a neighbor's smiling face?*

*For life is made of little things,
So let me not forget
To count my smallest blessings,
And before the sun is set,*

*To thank thee, Lord, for every one
That adds a note of cheer,
And our blessings will be multiplied
Before another year.*

[Pauline Stone, "Little Things"]

The longer we live, the more we realize the blessings that lie in everyday living. Just a few—the marvel of good health, the dearness of home and loved ones, the little treasures that money cannot buy, the wonder of the world of nature, freedom under God, and the bounty which we enjoy in this good land. Thanksgiving is a time to celebrate these and many other blessings. It is a way of life. Let us be thankful that there still is sunshine, that we still can glimpse the blue of the sky and, in our onward way, continue to look up. One of the great characters I remember with affection on this campus when I arrived many years ago was Herald R. Clark. We used to pass early each morning just north of the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. While he was still some twenty yards away from me, he'd call out, "Look up, H. I., look up!" And I'd look toward the east. I'd get things that would fill my soul for an entire day. But I learned something else, that I had been carrying my head down with burdens. He taught me to look up, and it made life just a little sweeter. I want to be thankful for friends with kind smiles, cheerful words. This is a time for grateful thanksgiving. Shakespeare sang, "O Lord, who lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness."

As I was looking through the discourses of Brigham Young and noting his words about complainers and grumblers, I thought that

maybe it would be appropriate, at least for me, to listen to his challenge. He was speaking about Zion's Camp, en route to Missouri:

We had grumblers, . . . unruly and discontented spirits. . . . Brother Joseph led, counseled and guided the company, and contended against those unruly, evil disposed persons. When we arrived in Missouri, the Lord spoke to his servant Joseph and said, "I have accepted your offering," and we had the privilege to return again. On my return many friends asked me, . . . "Who has it benefited? . . . If the Lord did command it to be done, what object had he in view of doing so?" . . . I then learned that those persons who asked me such questions were weak in faith and, like a faulty column in an edifice, could not bear up under the burden designed to rest upon them. . . . I wish this fact to sink into your hearts, that when men or women have doubts, they also have fear; and when they have fear, they are in danger of what? Of themselves. Want of confidence is the parent of moral imbecility and intellectual weakness. Hear it, ye Saints, that man or women that is crowned with crowns of glory, immortality, and eternal lives will never be heard to grumble or complain. I told those brethren that I was well paid—paid with heavy interest—yea that my measure was filled to overflowing with the knowledge that I had received by travelling with the Prophet. [Journal of Discourses, 10:20]

At this season I have much to be grateful for—the little things, but also the larger gifts that I live within the affection of a caring Church, that that Church teaches me I am individual and personal in the sight of God, and there is opportunity for affection between me and my Father in heaven, and that there is a living prophet who can and will guide and will help to lift the burden of the time. My friends, this is my testimony to you this day, and I bear it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.