

joy was *with Jesus and all his angels* more than with my father and more than with the members of that congregation.

*Jesus is the one who rejoices more than us* in this 175th anniversary celebration. And his joy will continue not only for another 175 years but forever, *because* the Lord Jesus is alive and will never die. We are his. Every day, Jesus continues to give us his gifts. “*Today, I am here for you,*” says he. So, we pray, “We are yours, oh Lord. Build us solid to you, and use us.” Happy anniversary! Amen.

Naomichi Masaki

### **Thanksgiving Day Church Services: Are They Really Necessary?**

A not uncommon way of beginning a Thanksgiving Day sermon in conservative Lutheran churches is telling the assembled saints that the holiday is not liturgically required like Christmas or Easter is. This service is seen as nonessential. This may cause those present to ask why they are in church. They now have good reason not to come the following year. The holiday was initiated by Abraham Lincoln during the dark days of the Civil War, so the day has this religious significance: that God is worthy of thanks even in bad times. Whether Lincoln was a Christian, and in what sense, is a matter of continuing historical debate. Driving through the neighborhood on the morning of Thanksgiving Day, you are unlikely to see worshipers dressed in their Sunday best heading to church. Catholics do not celebrate the holiday and neither do the Eastern Orthodox. Other denominations often use the day for interdenominational worship, led by the members of the local clergy association. LCMS congregations commonly commemorate Thanksgiving, many with a service on Wednesday evening.

For the sake of religious freedom, the Pilgrims fled England first for Holland and then for America with a brief stopover back in England. They landed on Cape Cod in 1620, and the following year the survivors of a horribly cold winter held a feast with the Native Americans in thanksgiving to God. So here are the roots of our national holiday. In the Old Testament, certain days were set apart for thanking God, so there is a biblical precedent for the commemoration apart from a president’s or governor’s proclamation. Ironically, *eucharist*, a word sometimes used for the service of Holy Communion, means “thanksgiving” and specifically thanksgiving to God. If a Lutheran pastor ends a reading with the words “This is the Word of the Lord,” without coaxing the congregation would most likely respond, “Thanks be to God.” If he says, “Bless we the Lord,” again the response is, “Thanks be to God.” This

is part of our religious fiber. Thanking God comes close to being synonymous with believing in him.

Quite apart from whether a president or governor proclaims that as citizens we should thank God, our society has already scraped off any remnants of religious meaning from the day. Even going around the table and having each one say for what he or she is thankful for hardly makes it a Christian custom, since the focus of thanking should be on the God who gives and not on what he gives. The Giver takes precedence over the gift—or at least he should. Any thought of thanking God for his bounty has been rendered nearly impossible by calling it “Turkey Day.” If watching Macy’s two-hour Thanksgiving parade is not a good enough reason for staying home and skipping church, there are the afternoon football games. With Santa Claus coming in at the end of the parade, it provides a transition into the season named for Christ, a season in which, however, his name is hardly mentioned in public celebrations.

In the pericope of the cleansing of the ten lepers, which is the Gospel assigned for Thanksgiving Day, Jesus says that in thanking him the once-leprous Samaritan is thanking God. “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:18).<sup>7</sup> So Thanksgiving Day is more than a First Article matter, in that we speak of God not in generic terms but address him as the Father of our Lord Jesus, who is present with his Spirit. Christians should be a little uncomfortable speaking of God only in terms of the First Article, as if that would be possible at all. John is quite specific about this: “All things were made through him [Jesus]” (John 1:3). Jesus is the Pantocrator, the Almighty, a title used of Jesus in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1:8). Should we have to settle on a corrective theme for Thanksgiving Day, it could be this one.

Nothing would be amiss if in our sermons, we commemorated those Englishmen who were not going to let King James I tell them how to conduct their church services. In Europe, kings called the shots not only in secular but also churchly matters. So it was ever since the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, which led to its establishment as the official religion of the empire. With the dissolution of the empire, kings and other princes assumed that authority, which led often to conflict between princes on one side and the pope and bishops on the other. It was also a factor in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

In England, the king’s domination of the church led to a group of outsiders, known to us as the Pilgrims, who left England first for the Netherlands. There a

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shared faith with the Reformed did not compensate for differences in language, so they sailed across the Atlantic not to Virginia, as they had planned, but to the uninviting New England coast, not far from what was soon settled by Puritans as Boston. Within a year, half of the Pilgrims had died. Looking at replicas of the rickety *Mayflower*, one wonders how many times it may have crossed the minds of these English refugees that the religion of the king may not have been all that bad. Today with governments and courts in America making regulations about where and how Christians may worship, with persecutions of Christians who choose not to support same-sex marriage publicly, with cancel culture and wokeism, the Pilgrims in their day—even with their adherence to the Reformed confession of Protestantism—stand out as exemplars of faith.

If Lutheran congregations cancel Thanksgiving Day services so as not to associate themselves with the Pilgrims, they overlook their own story of how the Missouri Synod came into being when Lutherans in Saxony and Prussia fled their countries to avoid a religious persecution that would require them to adopt Reformed liturgies and practices. In 1830, Lutherans in Prussia were forced to use a liturgy that, in accommodation to the minority Reformed population, required them to compromise their faith in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper. This persecution occurred slightly more than two centuries after the Pilgrims successfully fled their persecution. Refugees from the Saxon State Church came in five ships, of which only four made it to the port of New Orleans—one was lost at sea. These Lutherans even prepared a document like the Mayflower Compact, which provided rules for their community in their adopted country. Things did not go well in their new home in Missouri, and some wanted to go back to Germany, just as some Pilgrims wanted to return to England and later did so. The fleshpots of Egypt have their attraction. Most stayed and found other Lutherans in America who believed as they did. These are the people who established The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Compare the Missouri Synod's story to the Pilgrims'. Change the language from English to German, add a few more ships, push the calendar forward two centuries, and one story begins to resemble the other. The characters in the story have different names, spoke different languages, lived at different times, and came from different places, but the plots of their stories are startlingly similar—it was about fleeing religious persecution. Persecution belongs to the Christian experience. Read Acts. Why then would Lutherans in America *not* celebrate Thanksgiving Day services?

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