

Thanksgiving, Then and Now. An After-thought

E. C. Davis

November 26, 1920

Lancaster, PA

Most people have a vague idea that Thanksgiving Day is in some way related to the Pilgrims at Plymouth. They take it for granted that we have kept up a custom which they started. That is true. What a deep satisfaction it is to run back over the 300 years and think that we perpetuate a custom, well-grounded and of deep import.

During the past week I have noticed in the papers reports of a tendency to criticise and resent some of the practices that make up the festivities of our Thanksgiving Holiday. In several instances I have heard very severe criticism and dire warning for the life of the Nation because we have football games, athletic sports of various kinds, theatres and dances. It is stated that we should make the day a day of religious services. The dominating feature of the day should be the formal worship of God. Unless we cease to fix our attention on Football, dances, and the theatre on Thanksgiving Day, and attend the religious services, the nation is doomed.

Such is the purport of these remarks. I have stated them in extreme form for the sake of bringing out very definitely the point at issue. Personally I enjoy very deeply the religious service. The hour of worship means very much to me. I like the custom of a religious service on Thanksgiving Day. For many people the day has not been a Day of Thanksgiving unless some portion of it has been spent in worship or meditation. The experiences of life run too deep to be passed over with a light recognition of joy. I am glad people like to go to Church service on Thanksgiving Day.

Also I am glad they like the Football game, the theatre and the dance. I am going to the football game today. I sometimes go to the theatre on Thanksgiving Day, and I have been to dances on that day. Sometimes I stay at home all

day. There may be a diversity of administration but the one spirit.

I wish to enter a protest against this carping criticism of those who enjoy the athletic sports, the festival aspects of Thanksgiving Holiday. I voice this protest for two reasons.

First. The form in which the feeling of Thanksgiving expresses itself does not determine its character. The mere fact that some people attend a religious service on Thanksgiving Day does not prove that their feeling is any better, or their influence for the common good is any greater than the feeling and influence of one who goes to a football game. Two striking facts connected with the First Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims should be noted. They had a modest harvest, but they were sharing it in such a way that no one was in want. Each had his share. All had helped to produce it, and all shared in its enjoyment. Second. They were firm in the faith that it is not ceremony but life that counts. "He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity nor sworn deceitfully." Such a one enters into the gates of Thanksgiving. The spirit is what counts. I feel safer for the life of the nation with honest, wholesome men taking part in sports on a Holiday, than I would with the churches filled with corrupt, cowardly, self-seeking Pharisees. I would feel best of all if honest, wholesome, clean-minded men and women enjoyed both the sports and the hours of devotion.

I have a second reason for protesting against this habit of criticizing the folk because they wish to go to a football game, or the theatre, or the dance. The critics leave the impression that the Pilgrims spent about the entire day at their First Thanksgiving Day in religious services. That is not true to history. They did have games. The early historians tell us so. They did feast. So they recorded. But we have no record at all that they held any religious services whatever. I, personally, believe that they did have religious services. I could not prove it, nor could you. Says Byington, "So they appointed their first Thanksgiving. The Governor sent four men to shoot such game as the woods afforded, and those in one day secured as much

fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. They had games, military exercises, and feast. The Indians came to enjoy the festival with them. The Thanksgiving lasted a number of days and was probably accompanied by religious services, though these are not mentioned in the earlier records."

The truth is that those who emphasize the secular aspects of the Holiday are nearer to the Pilgrims form of Thanksgiving than those who emphasize the religious service.

But the real issue lies deeper. The quality of the Pilgrims, both in Massachusetts and in Pennsylvania, that counted was that they were people of integrity. Whether they were in the houses of worship or in the field of sport, they were men of integrity. They played the game on the level. Our nation's future is determined by the extent to which we maintain our standard of integrity.

Earl C. Davis  
Church of Our Father