

## Stop and Give Thanks

In the years to come, historians will look back at 2023 as the year the world came to an end. It won't be because thirteen major wars are being fought around the world, or because famine is threatening thirty million people in Africa. Nor will it be because, after killing more than one million Americans, Covid-19 is on the rise again, even as tuberculosis has reemerged as the world's deadliest infectious disease. It won't be because climate change has generated record-setting heat, drought, wildfires, flooding, and hurricanes. No, 2023 will be known as the year the world finally came to an end because the great Domestic Diva, Martha Stewart, cancelled her Thanksgiving dinner, declaring herself to be officially "turkeyed out."

Martha's decision to cancel her Thanksgiving festivities made national news. For decades, the caterer turned commentator on the good life has dictated exactly how millions of Americans set our tables, cook our meals, and decorate our homes for every conceivable holiday. Even after being convicted and jailed for insider trading, she remained an enduring arbiter of good taste and style. The idea that Martha Stewart can no longer be bothered to prepare a lavish feast for Thanksgiving feels completely catastrophic. Is *nothing* sacred anymore?

Happily, Martha hasn't given up completely on America's favorite feast. She had already roasted over a dozen turkeys for various media appearances before several of her expected dinner guests cancelled for illness. We can understand why she might decide to pull the plug on her party before cooking and carving up still more innocent birds. But Martha isn't alone in deciding that enough is enough where Thanksgiving is concerned. The internet is flooded with suggestions on how to simplify Thanksgiving this year, suggesting everything from serving storebought side dishes to – gasp! – meeting family and friends at a local restaurant. There seems

to be a shift in the collective consciousness around Thanksgiving. I'm not yet sure whether – to use Martha's catchphrase – that's a good thing.

Coming from a family that treasures tradition, I grew up convinced that certain items simply must be on the Thanksgiving table. Whether it's the turkey and stuffing, jellied cranberry sauce for my husband, my brother's preferred orange Jello concoction, or our daughter's favorite sherry wine cake, everyone's special dishes must be served, even if that means preparing far more food than anybody could reasonably eat. There are undoubtedly cooks out there who feel free to experiment with Thanksgiving dinner, but I'm not one of them. Time-honored rituals must be observed so that no one goes away disappointed. But that raises a question– if you do something just because you've always done it that way, how much meaning does it really have?

That question features in today's Gospel reading. En route to Jerusalem, Jesus is approached by ten lepers. They recognize the famous miracle worker and ask him for mercy. Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests and, as they do, they're healed of their affliction. But only one of the former lepers, a Samaritan, turns back to praise God and thank Jesus. What's wrong with the other nine? Why are they so ungrateful?

The other nine didn't do anything wrong. In fact, they did exactly what Jesus told them to do. By sacred law, people in Jesus's community who suffered from potentially contagious skin conditions were exiled. Even after they healed up, they couldn't just decide to come back on their own. They had to be examined and declared clean by the Temple authorities before they could return to their loved ones. That's why Jesus told the lepers to show themselves to the priests. But, as often happens in the Gospels, the nine former lepers got so focused on satisfying the law that they missed the larger point. Through Jesus, God had blessed them with a miracle.

Their first task wasn't to meet the letter of the law by letting the priests check them out. It was to rejoice, praise God, and give thanks as the Samaritan did.

In fairness to the other nine, it isn't always obvious when gratitude is due. 160 years ago, when Abraham Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving proclamation, our nation was immersed in a bloody civil war that took the lives of anywhere from 750,000 to 1,200,000 Americans. Many people, myself included, think the Civil War was a tragedy, but Lincoln knew that things could have been much, much worse. Other countries could have seized on the war as an opportunity to attack and conquer our still young nation. Civil unrest could have led to massive lawlessness, or natural disasters could have inflicted untold suffering on the civilian population. But none of those calamities happened, and Lincoln saw that as a blessing. His proclamation observed, "No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." Lincoln urged the American people to set aside a day in November to thank God for his generosity and pray for forgiveness and national healing, not because everything was perfect, but because life was still so good even when the war was so bad.

It's a bit of a reach from Lincoln's gratitude for imperfect blessings to our modern obsession with endless side dishes and seven kinds of pie, but it's easy to trace how we got here. Even before factory farming and mass production, food in the U.S. and Canada was vastly cheaper and more plentiful than it was in many places around the world. Millions of immigrants came here primarily to escape starvation. Set in late November, Thanksgiving easily incorporates gratitude for a bountiful harvest. And we should thank God that there's so much food available to us. We could definitely do a better job of growing, processing, and distributing it. But there's plenty to go around if we have the will to share, and that's a blessing.

Unfortunately, modern consumerism has distorted Thanksgiving into a secular celebration of food, parades, football, and Black Friday previews. For those of us who have to

plan, cook, and serve a meal that can take days to prepare, shopping and to-do lists take priority as we struggle to perfect every last detail. (If you've ever stood in the supermarket on the edge of tears because some crucial ingredient in Great-Grandma's famous giblet gravy is out of stock, you know exactly what I mean.) Suddenly, Thanksgiving isn't about thanking God – it's about turning what could be a shared, simple meal into performance art. Like the nine lepers who went straight to the Temple, we get so obsessed with doing what we think is expected of us that we forget to stop and be grateful for the miracles that bless us every day.

Based on what's showing up online, many of us seem to have decided that elaborate Thanksgiving dinners are a waste of time, money, and effort. That's probably a good thing, but it may depend on what's behind that decision. If the very idea of putting together one more traditional Thanksgiving dinner leaves you exhausted and resentful, by all means, skip it. But it's better to simplify Thanksgiving not out of annoyance, but to focus more on enjoying time with the people we love and thanking God for them. You don't need to eat six courses to do that.

Gratitude isn't something you can force yourself to feel. If your heart is set on having something turn out in a very specific way, whether it's a holiday dinner or an afternoon with your family, it's hard not to be disappointed if things don't come out the way you wanted. The problems of the world won't disappear tomorrow morning, nor will our personal difficulties. In particular, those of us who've lost loved ones will feel their absence and suffer for it. But it's still worth setting aside some time to think about the things in your life that are going, perhaps not perfectly, but pretty darned well. There's always something, I promise you. But if you can't think of anything off the top of your head, try to come up with something that could have gone disastrously wrong but didn't. Then stop working and take a few minutes to thank God for the blessings in your life, whatever they may be. That way, even if the turkey is dried out, the potatoes are lumpy or your Uncle Filbert starts a political argument over dessert, you'll have celebrated Thanksgiving for all the right reasons. As Martha might say, that will be a very good thing. Happy Thanksgiving, friends. Amen.