

It's a bit of a peculiar creature, Thanksgiving Day is. Here in the U.S., the Book of Common Prayer considers it a major feast. We give it a unique collect and list it under the section on Holy Days right there after All Saints. There is even a suggested Litany of Thanks that can be used on this day.

Americans did not always celebrate Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November, the date set by Abraham Lincoln. In 1939, an Episcopalian who was a former vestry member of St. Thomas Parish in Washington, D.C., changed the celebration to a week earlier. You may have heard of him: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You know how Episcopalians like to shake things up! Well, politics and religion don't always agree and so, after a great deal of pressure, two years later FDR sign a bill into law officially making the fourth Thursday in November the national holiday of Thanksgiving Day.

The secular world has had other influences on Thanksgiving. What began as a day of worship is now a day when many people are traveling, cooking or watching the Detroit Lions get humiliated on the football field. Many of them are already shopping for deals in anticipation of another day that began as a Christian day of worship—Christmas, which for us is, of course, the day we celebrate the Christ Mass. The secular world has a version of Easter focused on a rabbit that leaves colored eggs, and a version of St. Valentine's Day dedicated to supporting Hallmark, the DeBeers diamond people and Hershey's chocolate. St. Pat's is when scores of amateur drinkers guzzle green Budweiser, Mardi Gras is no longer exclusively tied to Lent and Halloween is when we tell our kids not only to go talk to strangers, but to take candy from them.

I'm having a bit of fun, but to fair there is really nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these secular perspectives. In fact, we share some of the more serious holidays with the secular world. Martin Luther King Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veterans day and, well, today: Thanksgiving day. And while we recognize all those days in different ways, Thanksgiving Day is more unusual—more of a hybrid than the others; a greater mix of church elements with secular.

For a good part of secular America, “Thanksgiving” is primarily a noun; a proper noun that signifies a specific date. For us, “thanksgiving” is mostly a verb. The difference matters. The difference does not make us better people nor does it make secular folks worse people. The difference matters because we enter this season with Jesus saying: “Do not worry about your life....*do not worry,*” while so many of our secular friends and family enter this season in ways that can feel quite worrisome indeed.

Tomorrow morning, the media will begin telling us stories about Black Friday shopping that we would not believe if not for the video footage and photographs of the pushing and shoving, the property damage and the violence as shoppers hell-bent on getting their hands on “door-buster” deals pour through the doors of stores. How must those folks feel when the dust settles?

The trade journal *Psychological Science* recently published compelling new research suggesting that there is actually something inherently unpleasant in thinking about buying material things that may be putting shoppers on edge. The research suggests that the dreadful anticipation itself helps to create conditions for violence. In a series of studies, Cornell University psychology professor Thomas Gilovich and grad student Amit Kumar explored different kinds of happiness that people get from buying *objects* as compared to spending money on *experiences*.

Even when the costs were about the same, people the studies described the anticipation of spending money on *experiences* as pleasant and tinged with excitement. The same people described the anticipation of buying *things* as less pleasurable, arousing more impatience than excitement. Professor Gilovich also found that experiences, especially shared experiences, bring a sense of connection and can deepen a person’s sense of identity. His research showed that the satisfaction of buying even expensive objects is short-lived and wears off after a few weeks. Last November, that stalwart of capitalism, The Wall Street Journal, published an article confirming these results and added references to

new research showing that giving money away makes people a lot happier than lavishing it on themselves.¹ Who would have guessed?

When Thanksgiving is just a noun—just a day to eat turkey before shopping, then it becomes almost self-evident to look for happiness in things, and not to waste our time and money on experiences. After all, material objects last longer and experiences are fleeting.

Unless you have experienced thanks-giving as mostly a verb, the idea that experiences bring people more happiness than material goods is counter-intuitive. After all, a trip to Europe might last a week, two if you can afford it. Hiking can be done over a weekend. Visiting a traveling exhibit at a museum can be completed in an afternoon. On the other hand, even a new iPhone lasts almost a year. A new sweater may last a couple of years. Jewelry and cars and so many other objects last substantially longer.

Decades of psychological research and centuries of spiritual experience point to the contrary. “Experiences,” Amit Kumar explains, “experiences live on in our memories and in the stories we tell, while our material goods ‘disappear’ as we inevitably get used to them.” In other words, having more stuff only makes us a happy for a short period of time because we adapt to having it.

The Wall Street Journal suggests that one antidote is to try to consciously foster appreciation and gratitude for what you have. The process of adaptation, the article explains, comes from taking what you have for granted, so you can slow the process down by reminding yourself of why you value what you have. The article goes on to say that you might want to try depriving yourself of your possessions for a while, perhaps by lending them or sharing them with someone else. This insight has been confirmed by recent research and experimentation.

In other words, you can experience thanks-giving as a verb as well as a noun. There are differences and the differences matter. And, as lovely as the confirming “new” research is, the difference is actually very old for those of us who hear Jesus saying in our scripture: “Do not worry about your life.”

¹ Blackman, A. (2014, November 10) Can Money Buy You Happiness? *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from www.wsj.com

You see, there are ancient, Biblical traditions about harvesting. Farmers in the ancient world would reap only *most* of their fields, but not all. They left the edges unharvested so that there would be something left for the poor and for strangers. Farmers felt a social responsibility for others but they also experienced a particular joy in encouraging others to gather part of the crop. For centuries, people of faith have given thanks at harvest time as an active response to the generosity of God, who provides the harvest.

The harvest was—and still is—an act of confidence in God’s continuing providence. Cutting down a field of wheat or alfalfa leaves the field apparently barren, and wise farmers will often plant crops that do not return a profit but that refresh the soil, replacing nutrients when they are plowed back into the ground. Or they will leave a harvested field unplanted for a season to allow the soil to rest. These are acts of trust in the cycles of nature.

Through this passage in Matthew, Jesus implores us to gather as a trusting community as a colony of the kingdom of God; a foretaste of the kingdom that offers experiences of God’s abundance, generosity and new life. “Strive first,” Jesus says, “for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.”

Jesus invites all into this kingdom to experience a world of abundance, but also of fragility and vulnerability, like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. We actively “thanks-give” (can I say that?), we actively “thanks-give” by gratefully gathering what God has provided for our needs and joyfully saving out a portion of that harvest for others, trusting that in the natural cycle, God will provide more for us all in the growing seasons ahead.

Strive first for the kingdom, then, and share the experience of thanksgiving not simply as a noun: the name of one day set aside for feeling thankful or as the inauguration of the holiday season. Give yourself to the experience of thanksgiving as an active verb through the spiritual practices of gratitude, compassion and faithful stewardship of God’s great bounty. To be in right relationship with God is to be constantly thanks-giving and participating in the generosity of God’s kingdom.