

Thanksgiving



Harvest festivals and thanksgiving rituals go back as far as our knowledge of culture and religion goes. The “grain mother” was honored by ancient Greeks and the Indo-Europeans.ⁱ In the Christian world, she is Mary at the height of August when we celebrate the Annunciation. In many parts of the world, the grain harvests are celebrated in wreaths or dolls made of wheat sheaves, ears of grain, straw, husks or flax. Our autumn arrangements of pumpkins, gourds, dry weeds, grains and flowers celebrate the fields’ harvest too.

A thanksgiving day, as actually celebrated by 17th-century Americans, was a communal day of fasting, meditation, and supplication to God. Both thanksgiving and fast days – jointly referred to as “public days” – served as replacements for Roman Catholic holidays (from “holydays”) such as Christmas, Easter, and saints’ days, which the Puritans rejected along with stained glass and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. This was part of their goal of simplifying and purifying the rituals of the Christian Church, which explains the term “Puritan.” When they emigrated they brought the public-day tradition from Calvinist Europe.

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush designated November as “National American Indian Heritage Month,” designed as a celebration of the history, art and traditions of the American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. In many ways, November is an odd time to observe Native American Heritage Month. It’s the month that the nation also observes the federal Thanksgiving holiday, which to some Native Americans is no cause for celebration, but rather a Day of Mourning.

Teaching Tolerance, a non-profit educational division of the Southern Poverty Law Center has many lesson plans for all ages for discussing the role and struggles Native Americans have had since Europeans landed in the Americas.

<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=750>

No matter how we celebrate Thanksgiving, we must remember that all we have is a gift from God and we live in an abundance of God’s love.

Collect for Thanksgiving Day (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 246)

Almighty and gracious Father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great bounty, for the provision of our necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

A Litany of Thanksgiving *(Book of Common Prayer, p. 836-837)*

Let us give thanks to God our Father for all his gifts so freely bestowed upon us.

For the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea.
We thank you, Lord.

For all that is gracious in the lives of men and women, revealing the image of Christ,
We thank you, Lord.

For our daily food and drink, our homes and families, and our friends,
We thank you, Lord.

For minds to think, and hearts to love, and hands to serve,
We thank you Lord.

For health and strength to work and leisure to rest and play,
We thank you, Lord.

For the brave and courageous, who are patient in suffering and faithful in adversity,
We thank you, Lord.

For all valiant seekers after truth, liberty, and justice,
We thank you, Lord.

For the communion of saints, in all times and places,
We thank you, Lord.

Above all, we give you thanks for the great mercies and promises given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord;
To him be praise and glory, with you, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

From the Eco-Justice Program of The National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA

As Thanksgiving approaches, the Eco-Justice Program of The NCCCUSA has two resources dealing with faith and food that can add to your harvest celebrations.

- ◆ *At the Lord's Table: Everyday Thanksgiving* is a resource for worship leaders, adult educators, and teenage youth group leaders. *At the Lord's Table* focuses on how our food choices and the type of agriculture we support reflect our relationship with Creation. This resource provides sermon starters, liturgies, prayers and youth group ideas.
- ◆ In addition the Eco-Justice Program has released *Sacred Food*, a Sunday School and Group Activity curriculum for elementary age children. Each of the sessions, such as "Respect for the Web of Life" and "Provide for All People," engage children through activities and spiritual practices exploring the idea that food is not only fuel for the body, but fuel for the soul as well. This curriculum provides quality reflections for the adult teachers and lesson plans for both the lower and upper elementary school child.
- ◆ <http://ncecojustice.org/index.htm>

Thanksgiving Activities for church and families

- ◆ **Act it out.** Read the story of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Remind your children that Jesus was pleased with the *one* man who returned to give thanks for being healed. Provide rags for bandages and let your children play the roles of the lepers and Jesus.
- ◆ **Make some noise.** Look up the story of the Israelites' celebration after the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt (Nehemiah 12:27-46). Talk about the instruments they used and the two great choirs that marched atop the walls to the temple; a joyous, active "thanksgiving" that could be heard "far away" (Nehemiah 12:43b). Put together a home grown band using real or handmade instruments. Practice joyful praise songs and march around the "walls".
- ◆ **Read a book.** Corrie ten Boom's book *The Hiding Place* (Bantam) teaches a great lesson in thankfulness. Share Corrie's story, pointing out her struggle to be "thankful in all things." She even thanked God for fleas in her barracks. She later learned that the fleas kept the guards away and allowed Corrie and others to study the Bible undisturbed.
- ◆ **Create a chain reaction.** Make a *God is Good* chain. Gather scissors, stickers, pencils, crayons, glue and construction paper. Cut the paper in strips and ask your kids to think about the many ways God is good. Have them write or draw these attributes on the strips, then connect them to form a chain and hang it in a place where it will remind your family of God's goodness.
- ◆ **Make a Blessing Basket.** Place a pretty fall basket containing a pencil and pad of paper in an easy-to-reach location. Throughout the month, encourage family members to jot down ways God has blessed them. Younger children can draw or cut out pictures from magazines. Read these together and give God thanks each day or set aside some time on Thanksgiving Day.
- ◆ **Trim a Tree of Thanks.** Draw and cut out a large paper tree with lots of loose leaves in autumn colors. Mount the tree in a prominent place and put the leaves nearby in a box with glue and markers. Ask your family to write things they are thankful for on the leaves, filling the tree by the end of the month. Consider the following question: "If I could keep only the gifts I've thanked God for today, what would I have?" Ask younger children: "What do you want to thank God for today?" Encourage your family to add to the tree daily.
- ◆ **Find your seat.** Have the children make a place card for each place setting on the Thanksgiving table. On one side, write names of guests and family; on the other, type a Scripture verse about being thankful. Let each person read a verse before the blessing.
- ◆ **Encourage sharing.** Place a paper leaf at each place with an "assignment" written on it. Each person adds to the festivities by completing their assignment. Assignments might include:
 - Read Psalm 100.
 - Share a Thanksgiving memory (use this on several paper leaves).
 - Sing a Thanksgiving song (good for preschoolers).
 - Lead the group in a praise chorus (have copies of the lyrics available).
 - Say the blessing for our meal.
- ◆ **Set the mood.** Give an unlit votive candle to each person. Begin by lighting your own candle and thanking God for specific blessings. Then, continue the process around the table until all the candles are lit, making sure to keep the flames away from small children. Lead your family in a candlelight service of thanksgiving.



ⁱ Nelson, Gertrud Mueller. *To Dance With God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration* (Mahway, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986).