

**Thanksgiving Day**  
Homily of November 25, 2004  
by Father Brian Joyce

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The reason it is so important to celebrate Thanksgiving is so that we won't all freeze to death. Let me repeat that.... The reason it is so important to celebrate Thanksgiving is so that we won't all freeze to death.

To be a people of thanksgiving means to recognize that all that we have and all that we are is not so much our own doing, as it is a free and generous gift from God and a free and generous gift from life itself. To be a people of thanksgiving means lighten up a little and let the words of Jesus sink in. Don't worry so much about what we are going to eat. Don't worry so much about what we are going to drink, or how we are going to dress. Let that sink in at least enough to ease our stress and ease our concern and maybe even ease our depression or our worry or even our panic at times. To be a people of thanksgiving means to face life with grateful hearts, with trustful spirit and with open hands.

Now, the exact opposite of thanksgiving is not selfishness, and the exact opposite of thanksgiving is not ungratefulness. is not ingratitude. The exact opposite of thanksgiving is greed, one word, "greed," what Christian thinkers for a thousand years have dubbed, "one of the seven deadly sins." Greed, so opposite to thanksgiving, is not about the size of our bank account. It's not about our money or our particular possessions. It's not about our clothing or our house or our security. Greed is about one word, and that one word is "more." ....More. There is never enough room for us to be thankful for how much we have or for how little we have because we are focused and busy about looking for more. And then this is what happens. Instead of holding lightly and gently and generously what we have, we grip our possessions so tightly, that we are not really holding them. They are holding us. They have possession of us. They have handcuffed us so that they become not a gift to be enjoyed, let alone shared, but a straitjacket to hold us in place while we stay busy looking for more.

It was just the opposite with the Pilgrims and with the native Americans on that first Thanksgiving Day. Actually, it was a three day feast. Remember, in January of 1621, one hundred two Pilgrims, Puritans, arrived at Plymouth Rock. Fifty-two of them died in that first winter, and the Algonquin Indians who saw these strangers struggling to survive, didn't hold on tightly to their land or their possessions or what they knew. Instead they taught the Pilgrims how to plant and grow on this difficult and different soil. In fact, two of them even moved in with the Pilgrims to help them survive. And the Pilgrims, at the end of their first nine months, when they realized that they had survived most of their first year, didn't greedily hold on to the meager amount that they had, but they proposed a three-day banquet and they invited the Indians to join them. I don't think they knew how

big the Indian family was because, in addition to the two Indians that they knew, ninety came to join the fifty Pilgrims. But, not to worry, because the Native Americans saw the problem and they did not greedily hold onto their possessions either. They brought the main course. They brought deer and venison. They brought turkey, something we are very familiar with, wild turkey (not the kind you drink, the kind you eat.) And both Pilgrim and Native American shared their culture and their custom.

Miles Standish, who was the captain of the Pilgrims, sat at the head of the table, something new to the Indians. So, their chieftain sat at the other end of the table. And then, the Indians, for the first time, instead of eating on the ground on a mat, sat at the table. And, as was the Algonquin custom, their women, their wives, sat alongside them and ate with them. And the Pilgrims followed their custom. Their women stood silently behind the men and did not eat until the men's food and conversation was over. We've come a little way at least in that direction and have caught up with some of the customs of our primitive native tribes. Their table of thanksgiving and our tables of thanksgiving today represent the open hand of welcome, the open hand of sharing and the open hand of thanksgiving, rather than the tightly closed fist of greed.

There is a story, and it has actually been set to poetry and it 's true. There is a story of five people who froze to death around a campfire on a bitterly cold night. The fire was dying out, but each of them had a stick of wood that they could contribute to keep the fire going. Yet, each one refused to give what they had. The woman would not give her stick of wood because there was a male in the circle. The homeless man would not give his stick of wood because there was a rich man there. The rich man would not give his contribution because it would warm someone who was obviously shiftless and lazy. The Christian would not give his stick of wood when he recognized that there was a Muslim in their midst. And the African-American withheld his piece of wood to get even with the whites for all they had done to him and to his race in the past centuries. The fire died out, as each one held onto the piece of wood that could have saved them all. This story was originally told in poem form that ends with these tragic lines: Five logs held fast in death's still hand Was proof of human sin. They did not die from the cold outside. They died from the cold within.

The reason it is so important to celebrate Thanksgiving is so that we won't all freeze to death. May we all have a joyful and a very warm Thanksgiving, and may our world become a welcome and warm and thankful place. Amen.