

Prayer Event #5 October 3, 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation (part 1 of 4)

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever.
In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and He answered me by setting me free.
It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.
The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.
You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever.*

Psalm 118:1,5,8,18,28,29

Dear Ones,

As you know, over the past weeks I have been describing what I would like to propose as the “Ten Greatest Prayer Events in US History,” a series of articles inspired by James P. Moore’s book *One Nation under God: a History of Prayer in the United States*. The fifth prayer event of the series is the Thanksgiving Proclamation of October 3, 1863 written by Secretary of State William Seward under the guidance of Abraham Lincoln.

You might suppose that Thanksgiving Day has been as much a fixture of our national life as the Stars and Stripes or the Declaration of Independence. All of us who read about Thanksgiving in elementary school have an indelible image of Pilgrims and Indians sitting down together for the first Thanksgiving feast in the fall of 1621. While it is true that several of the colonies had thanksgiving celebrations from time to time and that President George Washington himself issued a proclamation for the celebration of a national day of thanksgiving and prayer for Thursday (a day that could be safely considered not to favor the holy day of any religious group), November 26, 1789, there was no annual observance of Thanksgiving as a national holiday until the Lincoln administration began it in the years 1863-1864.

In 1827 a thirty-eight year old widow who was struggling to support her five young children after the sudden death of her husband wrote what turned out to be a successful novel. *Northwood* had three distinctions: it was the first American best-seller written by a woman, it was the first novel to discuss slavery, and it contained the first written proposal for a national day of Thanksgiving: “We have too few holidays. Thanksgiving, like the Fourth of July should be considered a national festival and observed by all our people.”

You are well familiar with another work by Sarah Josepha Hale, the author of *Northwood*, even though you may not be aware of it. She wrote what may well be the best-known poem in the English Language. It begins, *Mary had a little lamb, whose fleece was white as snow . . .*” Her most lasting influence on American Society, however, has to do with prayer. For nearly forty years she patiently, persistently, and singlehandedly lobbied for an annual day of Thanksgiving and prayer, writing innumerable letters to the state governors and to every president from John Tyler to Lincoln.

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After her successful novel, Sarah Hale was offered the editorship of a Ladies Magazine in Boston. This modestly successful enterprise blossomed after the magazine was bought out by a Philadelphia publisher who then hired Mrs. Hale as editor of the *Godey's Lady's Book*, a magazine that achieved a circulation of 150,000 in the antebellum United States. The magazine is now most famous for the lavish color plates showing the latest women's fashions (Sarah Hale despised these, but Mr. Godey insisted on them because, like swimsuit models of today, they boosted circulation), but in its own time it was most significant for being the first magazine to draw mainly from American writers rather than British ones. Sarah Hale edited this magazine until her retirement in 1877 at the age of 89, and used her editorials to seek support for the idea of a national Thanksgiving.

The idea was not unprecedented. Although the Puritans' feast of 1621 seems to be mostly mythical, and Washington's Thanksgiving of 1789 was a one-shot affair, by the 1830's several states did indeed celebrate Thanksgiving annually. There were, however, two factors that produced a great deal of passive opposition to Mrs. Hale's proposal. In the first place, Thomas Jefferson had refused to issue any proclamations for national days of prayer during his presidency because he didn't want to seem to be establishing a national religion and he thought that setting national holidays was too much like what a king or an emperor did. Since most of the presidents following Jefferson were also Jeffersonian or Jacksonian Democrats, Jefferson's precedent was a weighty one. Secondly, the celebration of Thanksgiving was initially limited to the Northern States, particularly New England. Since it was seen as a sectional holiday, other states, and especially Southern states, resisted it. In fact, Texas continued to resist the celebration of Thanksgiving even after the Civil War. Governor Oran Milo Roberts refused a petition to celebrate Thanksgiving in Texas and concluded his refusal in this way: "it's a d---d Yankee institution anyway." Since the prewar politics of the country involved a great deal of placating Southern sensibilities, no president would dare sanctifying a New England tradition on the national stage.

As the Civil war neared, Mrs. Hale's campaign grew in intensity and urgency. She saw Thanksgiving as a national prayer event with great potential political repercussions. As editor of a national magazine, Sarah Hale had to be very cautious in her political or religious pronouncements. *Godey's Lady's Magazine* hardly acknowledged the Civil War even as it was being fought. Nonetheless, more than most she saw the need to maintain the Union. She wrote in 1859, "If every state would join in Union Thanksgiving on the 24th of this month (November), would it not be a renewed pledge of love and loyalty to the Constitution of the United States?" She believed that united prayer thanking God for the Union would save the Union.

This was a belief that Abraham Lincoln came to share heartily. Lincoln issued nine separate calls for national prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving during his presidency. In 1861 and 1862 the emphasis was on fasting and repentance, seeking God's mercy in the midst of the cataclysm of war and the almost unmitigated string of disasters the Union faced during the first two years of that war. After the Emancipation Proclamation and the Battle of Gettysburg, however, Lincoln issued his first Thanksgiving Proclamation for Thursday, August 6th. Reflecting on both the disasters and the victories, Lincoln wrote: "*It is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father and the power of His hand equally in these triumphs and these sorrows.*"

Notice that word *equally*. After President Grant made the celebration of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November permanent, Sara Hale wrote a poem which captures the spirit of the day as it has come to be celebrated in the U.S.A.:

“Our National Thanksgiving”

*All the blessings of the fields,
All the stores the garden yields,
All the plenty summer pours,
Autumn's rich, o'erflowing stores,
Peace, prosperity and health,
Private bliss and public wealth,
Knowledge with its gladdening streams,
Pure religion's holier beams:
Lord, for these our souls shall raise
Grateful vows and solemn praise.*

This poem is positive all the way through. Lincoln, however, understood that both the triumphs and the disasters came from God's hand, and that Thanksgiving day could not be complete if thanks for the blessings were not tempered with an accounting for the challenges. (End of part 3—to be continued)

On October 3, 1863, exactly 74 years to the day after Washington issued his Thanksgiving Proclamation, Lincoln issued a proclamation that established Thanksgiving as a national holiday. The edict for that day was written by Secretary of State William Seward, but it included the elements that Lincoln had demonstrated were important to him in his previous proclamations. This, to my mind, is the key sentence: *“I recommend to them (the citizens of the United States) that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it . . .”* Lincoln envisioned Thanksgiving as a national Holiday for thanksgiving, yes ---but also for **repentance**. For him it was not enough to accept the blessings from God's hand but it was also necessary to at least admit the possibility that the disasters were God's way of correcting national negligence and corporate sin.

The greatest and most obvious corporate sin in 1863 to our minds (and to many of Lincoln's contemporaries) was slavery, practiced by the South and tolerated by the North. With slavery abolished, we might be tempted as a nation to think ourselves absolved of sin. We do, indeed, frequently speak of the United States as the “most righteous nation” in the world. If we do so, we turn the celebration of Thanksgiving into the Pharisee's prayer “I thank thee, Lord, that I am not as other men are.” Lincoln, however, perceived the heart of our national sin, when he wrote in the August 6th proclamation the following: *“I invite the people of the United States to assemble on that occasion in their customary places of worship . . . (to) render the homage due to the Divine Majesty for the wonderful things He has done in the nation's behalf . . . and (to) invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to subdue **the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and***

cruel rebellion . . .” Lincoln was not fighting first to end slavery but to sustain the Union. He recognized that what was undermining the Union was sin—the perverse selfishness that would lash out in anger if **my** views, **my** customs, **my** state was offended.

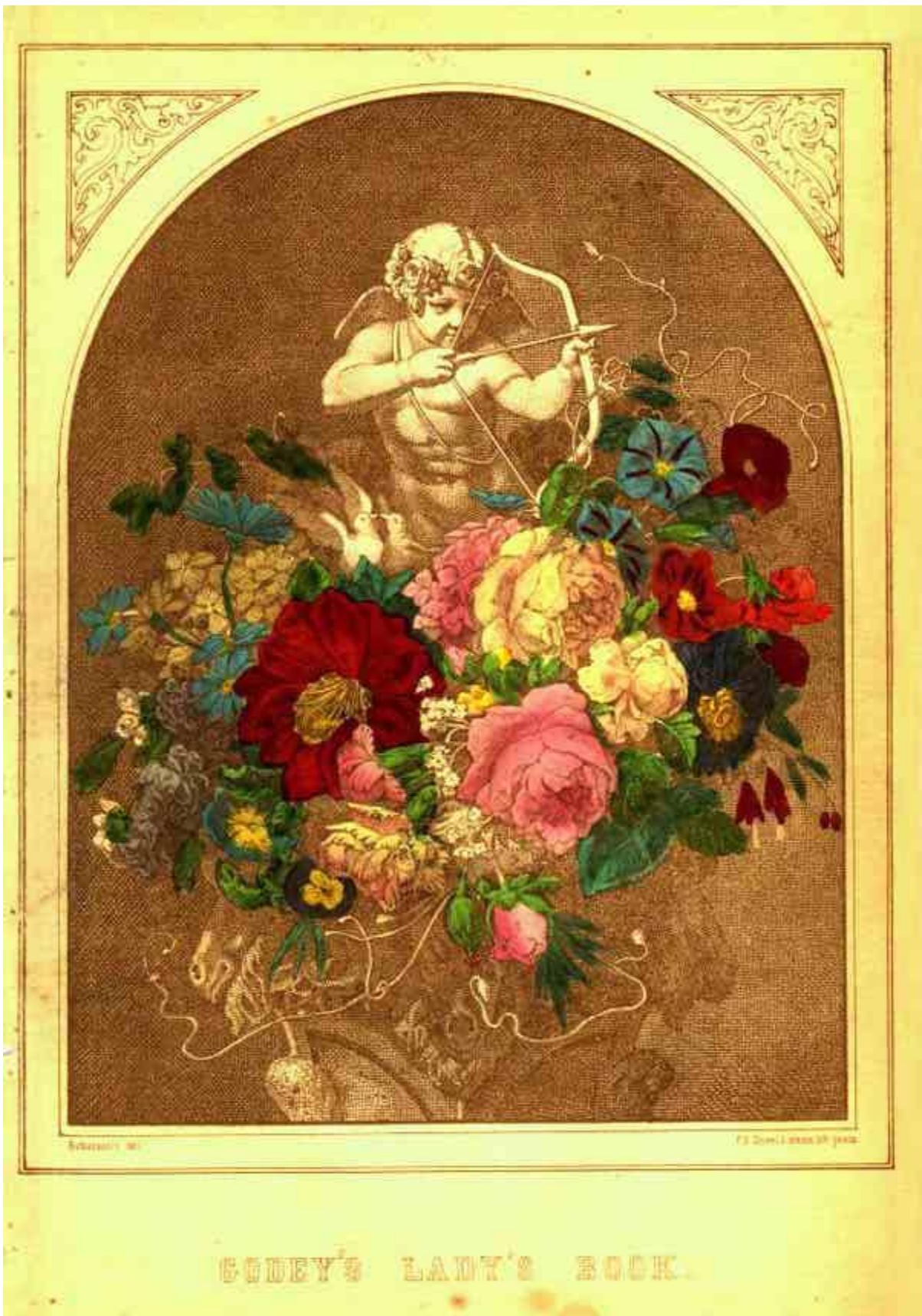
I humbly suggest that it would be a good idea for Christians and their churches to return to Mr. Lincoln’s idea of Thanksgiving as a day of prayer for thanks to God for his blessings and of repentance before Him for the anger that we have perpetually and needlessly been part of in the midst of our political, religious, social, and ethnic affiliations.

In Christ,
Pastor David









Whitcomb's No.

F. S. Doolittle and Co. New York

GODEY'S LADY'S BOOK.

Thomas Nast's 1879 cartoon, showing all ethnicities in the US gathered at a thanksgiving dinner for all. The Cake in the middle reads "Universal Suffrage", the ideal of equal voting rights for all.

