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Title: Antidote for Grief

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Text: [1 Thessalonians 5:13b-18](#)

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We paint the picture wrong. I don't know when it got started. Maybe it happened slowly, just a brushstroke here or there. Maybe when George Washington declared, in 1789, it a national day of thanksgiving. More likely it was when Sarah Josphea Hale, author of nursery rhymes like Mary had a Little Lamb, launched a campaign to

establish Thanksgiving as a national holiday. Surely it was by the time Lincoln heeded her request 36 years later and the great painters of the 19th century began to put it to the canvas. The picture painted then and now, in the mind's eye of most Americans is pretty, pleasant, and peaceable, a Hallmark greeting card view of Thanksgiving. Well-dressed pilgrims and proud Indians enjoy the plenty of harvest, a cornucopia of abundance. It is a "life is beautiful" depiction, easily taught and enacted by school-age children. It is a great picture that is flat out wrong.

The reality was far different and intensely painful, a story that has a backdrop that is tragic and filled with grief. You remember that the Pilgrims fled England due to the persecution, one hundred-two separatists departing for a difficult sixty-six-day voyage. They landed at Plymouth Rock four hundred years ago this coming December 18, 1620, three hundred miles north of their Virginia target.

Most of the colonists remained on board the ship through the brutal winter. It brought a cornucopia of abundance, abundant suffering. There was little to eat and disease rampant. Death from exposure to scurvy and outbreaks of contagious disease were commonplace. William Bradford describes it as a pandemic with daily death totals, sometimes as many as two or three. At one point, there were only six or seven strong enough to care for the rest.

Ponder the absolute horror of that first Plymouth winter. By spring, no family was left unmarred by the ravages of disease, despair, and death. Fifty were dead. Imagine living in the cold, dirty hold of the tiny Mayflower, watching half the people you know and love perish because of natural forces beyond

your control. There was so much suffering and sadness, it is hard to imagine the misery they endured.¹

With apologies to Hallmark and well-meaning grade schoolteachers, the Pilgrims seated at that first Thanksgiving table were haggard survivors—exhausted men and women still thin and weak, wearing little more than rags. They were grateful to have survived but looming over whatever happy feelings they experienced were incredibly deep measures of grief and sorrow. Somehow, they were able to choose gratitude over bitterness, thanksgiving over self-pity. They realized what scripture teaches. Thanksgiving is the antidote for grief. They knew to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

I shared this image with you not to destroy a cherished and well-crafted picture of Thanksgiving, but rather to suggest that we have more in common with our pilgrim ancestors this year than ever before. We too have suffered a terrible year of sorrow and loss and approach our day of Thanksgiving grieving.

Perhaps you have not thought of it this way. Grief too often is described as an individual, personal emotion, the pain we feel when love is stopped. We grieve the loss of a loved one, a father or a mother, a husband or wife, or a child. In that loss, love is taken away. Each year, many approach Thanksgiving and Christmas without a family member or friend for the first time. This year of course is no different although we also know that over 250,000 people have died, unexpectedly taken by the coronavirus. Many more grieve the loss of loved ones this Thanksgiving.

But we grieve not just the loss of a person. Grief is an emotional response to any loss. The loss of home, jobs, support systems, relationships, health, pets, even a sense of security and safety. And just like the pain of giving up a loved one, there is pain with these losses. All of these individual losses are present each thanksgiving but of course more so this year. Something on this list connects with all of us.

But grief isn't just individual. It can be communal and while this year feels unique, there have been times you can recall when we grieved as a nation when we recognized together the suffering of our collective humanity in a tragedy. The nation grieved in 1986 as we watched the tragedy of the space shuttle *Challenger* crew taken from us. We grieved as a nation in 2001 by the televised deaths of thousands of innocent civilians in terrorist attacks on 9/11.

And this year, we grieve together as a nation a year of the unexpected tragedy in the pandemic, a vulnerable, inadequate healthcare system, a country filled with terrible social unrest, and a democratic structure and election which threatened our core values.

We grieve a year of losses. Lost lives, lost jobs, lost celebration, lost trips, lost security, and certainly, lost identity. All that we grieve needs to be acknowledged because there is no healing until grief gets named. As Shakespeare so ably penned in Macbeth. "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak will whisper in your heart until it breaks." ²

Somehow, I believe that the pilgrims knew this. Perhaps Bradford led them in their honest assessment of their losses. We don't know that any more than we know the full menu of the thanksgiving table. But I believe that they acknowledged their year of profound loss and then, sought an antidote for their grief-- thanksgiving. They knew what scripture gives testimony. Gratitude and thanksgiving rejoice in the knowledge that God is ever-present in every time of need and will restore and heal us. They named their grief and then gave thanks knowing that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18)

They remembered, along with Job that God is God and God alone "... binds up and gives relief; ... His hands also heal." (Job 5:18) They recalled the promises that the Lord presented through Isaiah. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1b-3a).

"Surely that Savior has born our griefs and carried our sorrows..." (Isaiah 53:4 KJV) It is no wonder that they embraced Paul's admonition to the church in Thessaloniki, themselves grieving the loss of community and facing fierce opposition from Romans civic leaders, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

They understood the true antidote to grief is thanksgiving. Gratitude is a call to remember who God is and what God has done and will do. Thanksgiving is a posture, a way of living that remembers that God is good, and God is for us. And if God is good, we are blessed beyond imagination and if God is for us, then nothing can separate us from that goodness, certainly not hardship or distress, a winter of famine and death, or a year of pandemic, politics, and protests. Thanks be to God that nothing can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus

The pilgrims named their grief and then named this truth. And so should we. For every grief, gratitude should be offered, for every trial, a word of thanks lifted up to God because thanksgiving is the antidote for grief. What do you grieve? There is off-setting gratitude. What have you lost this year? As great as that loss is, there is something greater. Thanksgiving.

This year more than ever, we are like pilgrims who approached the first Thanksgiving grieving. They model the behavior needed to consider all that we've experienced. Thanksgiving. We need to gather not just to count the Lord's blessings, but to take stock of how we are feeling, naming and claiming our losses, not just that we can't gather in big family groups. We need to put in words all of the grief we are experiencing, some obvious and some subtle, then give thanks. That is how we can discover the joy of the antidote.

Over the months that we have been challenged by our pandemic, I have found myself singing a familiar hymn. I mentioned earlier to staff and they know the story behind it You likely do too. But it is always worth telling.

Its author is Martin Rinkhart. Rinkhart was born a cooper's son in Eilenburg, Saxony. Rinkhart enjoyed a good education, eventually graduating from Leipzig in theology. Like the other Martin, Martin Luther, Rinkhart was a good musician and entered the ministry as a Lutheran cantor, then as a deacon in Eisleben. In 1617, he returned to his home as archdeacon of Eilenburg.

The next year, the horrors of the Thirty Years War began. At the same time, Eilenburg was a good place to be and a bad place to be. It was a good place to be because it was a walled city that became a refuge for the war-ravaged population. It was a bad place to be because, in a fortified city, disease can run rampant. For some time, Rinkhart was the only pastor in Eilenburg because the others had fled or died. It is reported that in 1637 a great pestilence swept through the city that left 8,000 dead, including Rinkhart's wife. Amid his grief, Rinkhart conducted nearly 5,000 funerals, sometimes leading as many as 40 or 50 per day.

At the end of the war, Rinkhart did something amazing. He published a hymn, one that the church has sung for centuries since. You know it.

*Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.³*

Yes, it is. Still ours today, tomorrow, on Thanksgiving, and beyond.

Dear grieved people. We have lost much this year, likely more even yet. But the sure antidote for sorrow and grief is thanksgiving. So, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/history-of-thanksgiving>

² Shakespeare, William. Macbeth. Acts 4, Scene 3. Paraphrased to modern English.

³ <https://www.thedestinlog.com/news/20181120/story-behind-song-pastor-gives-praise-thanks-during-darkest-of-times>