

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. But I have to be honest with you, it hasn't always been. Thanksgiving for me was a little different. Since my parents didn't raise me, I often found myself at the homes of friends for the complete traditional Thanksgiving. Though Thanksgiving seemed to provide me with everything I needed, I didn't appreciate it. Something still seemed to be missing. Often I struggled to understand why my parents were not part of the Thanksgiving table or even part of my life. I spent so much time focusing on the why of it all that my thoughts hindered me from appreciating the warmth and comfort I did have.

Sometimes we just can't stop and accept the kindness we have around us, perhaps because we feel that others owe us kindness. I'm not saying I wasn't thankful; I completely understood what it meant to be thankful. The older I got, my perspective changed and I realized that I needed to give thanks. I gave thanks to God for my dreams, hopes and ability to overcome obstacles. I was thankful for the friends who had given me memories of a warm, traditional Thanksgiving and for God's peace that someday I would create that with my own family. I was thankful most of all for personal growth. It was through personal growth that I understood that all my life experiences, whether good or bad, had a deeper meaning.

My appreciation for Thanksgiving has grown over the years, and it has become my favorite holiday. One reason is that it is one of the few days we have saved just for families and friends. We have done a better job of keeping the Thanksgiving holiday from getting away from us. It has not yet taken charge of our lives. Somehow we have mostly kept it centered on our family and those who mean the most to us. I like Thanksgiving because I still own it. It is within my control.

Thanksgiving's central theme is the ritual of the family gathering together to share a meal. It is a gentle reminder of the times when we sit down together, serving each other, passing the food, saying prayers of thanks, and listening to each other's stories. Simply said, spending time with each other. It is our own private family sacrament of remembrance, reunion, renewal of connections, and thankfulness for life's blessings.

There is another reason--a simple one. Thanksgiving encourages thankfulness and gratitude. Being thankful is good for us. I don't want to argue that Thanksgiving always or automatically puts us in a state of thankfulness. The formal public prayers we say on that day don't do the job. We can get through a Thanksgiving Day without really being grateful for much of anything other than the meal. But the day prompts us and reminds us to be grateful. We remember how thankful we are for things we usually take for granted and we remember how much more blessed we are than others might be.

If we let it, Thanksgiving can do more. It can move us to say private prayers of thanks--avoiding the prayers we say for other people to hear and aiming our prayers straight towards God. Practicing thankfulness rids us of all the bad, negative, mean-spirited thoughts that have piled up inside us. There is no room in a thankful heart for pettiness, jealous feelings, anger, or disappointment. In short, thankfulness equals happiness. Naturally, prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude should be said year round. Being thankful is a constant work in progress since life doesn't always present itself as we would like.

This Thanksgiving, I will continue to thank God for how my life has changed. I am thankful for the many people and experiences that have encouraged me to grow. I thank Him for allowing me to touch life, and hopefully have my life touch someone else in return. I also thank my husband and my three beautiful children, who mean the world to me, and continue to teach me about life and love. And I'm thankful that I am continuing to learn as life goes on, because each day is a blessing, and no day is guaranteed.

- Cherie DiCesare