

“5 Kernels of Corn”

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1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Colossians 2:6-7

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him,
rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in
thanksgiving.

Are you wondering about the corn kernels you received as you came into worship?

As you may know, the Pilgrims and some others left England on September 6, 1620, because they wanted a place where they could freely practice their religion. After a longer voyage than expected, they arrived at Cape Cod Bay on November 11. They didn't immediately see a suitable place for building, so they spent a month exploring. They wanted a good deep harbor where they could anchor their ship. They wanted good land to plant crops come spring. And uncertain of the welcome they'd receive from the people already living here, they wanted a place they could defend. Finally they found what looked like a good place and named it Plymouth. And on December 23, they started felling trees for construction.

Yes, you heard right; they started building two days before Christmas. 17th century Massachusetts was cold with plenty of snow, sleet, and wind. Sometimes a storm would blow in so that all they could do was wait it out on their ship. And of course, days were short. It was a hard winter.

Can you imagine spending two months on a tiny ship, then a month trying to find the right location – still living on the boat, rowing back and forth, wading in frigid water? Can you imagine trying to erect houses while you're hungry all the time because the food from was running out? Between hunger and exhaustion, people were getting sick.

They divided themselves into nineteen “families” – the single men cohousing with families so they'd need to build fewer houses. In January one of the houses burned down. No one was hurt, but all that effort... lost. Then there were the wolves and the mountain lions. By this time, they'd eaten all the food they'd brought from England and had to depend on their questionable hunting skills. So many sick, weary, starving... There were about a hundred people to begin, but through the winter more than half them died.

Years later, the legend started that each person only had five kernels of corn to eat each day.

As winter turned to spring, the Wampanoags who were already living in the area came near Plymouth to catch lobsters and shad, as they did every year. They shared some of their food, and showed the newcomers how to catch shad and lobsters. The Wampanoag gave them seed corn and instructed them how in growing it.

Spring turned to summer. The Pilgrims gradually began to find more and better food on their

own. The harvests came in and by October, they wanted to celebrate.

Those who hunted provided birds and deer. The four women who were still alive did all the cooking. Ninety Wampanoag – all men – dropped in with more game and were invited to stay.

Their meal likely included corn, squash, beans, and whatever other vegetables they'd grown, venison, wild fowl, seafood and fish. The celebration lasted for days, with all kinds of food, games, and fun.

The story goes that, in addition, each person also received five kernels of corn as a reminder of that first winter. The story is probably more myth than history, but it's a good reminder for each of us. Sometimes we need tangible reminders to help us remember what we're thankful for. That's why we each received five kernels – so we're reminded to be thankful.

I'm thankful for my health. True, I can't eat bread or spaghetti or cookies. I can't eat much cheese or potatoes or legumes. Many of my favorite foods are off limits, but I'm healthier today than I was ten years ago. My body's been complaining lately because I haven't been moving nearly enough. I'm thankful.

Europeans were coming to fish on the east coast years before the Pilgrims arrived in New England. They brought diseases with them, diseases for which people on this continent had no immunity. Four years before the Pilgrims arrived, an epidemic – smallpox, maybe, or measles – swept through Nova Scotia and continued down the coast. Throughout that whole area, nine out of ten people died. Entire villages. And yet, when the Pilgrims arrived the Wampanoag helped them.

Maybe you remember when you had better health... when you were stronger. Still we can get around. We have breath. We can walk to the parlor and drink coffee and visit together after worship.

We can be thankful for satisfaction and renewal. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

This is a paradox – we're satisfied and not satisfied at the same time. My grandmother made the best apple pie in the world. I always felt delight and satisfaction when I ate it. But I wanted more because what I tasted created a desire to taste it again.

It's that way with righteousness. The more we practice God's ways, the more we want to be righteous in all our ways. The psalmist writes: "God satisfies the one who was parched with thirst, and fills up the hungry with good things!"

Another thing, we can be thankful for is that God loves us and wants to be part of our lives. And that when we stray, God gathers us in and forgives us.

The prophet Zephaniah wrote: "Your God is present among you, a strong warrior there to save you. God will calm you with their love and will rejoice over you with singing" (3:17). Isn't this what we all long for? What keeps us coming back to church each week?

Governor Neff of Texas spoke to the assembled convicts of penitentiaries of that state. As he finished, he said he'd stay to listen if anyone wanted to speak with him. Many men remained, many of them lifers. One by one they each told the governor they were there through a frame-up, an injustice, or a judicial blunder.

Finally, one approached, saying, "Governor, I just want to say that I'm guilty. I did what they

sent me here for, but I believe I've paid for it. If I were freed, I would do everything I could to be a good citizen and prove myself worthy of your mercy." The governor pardoned him.

So it is with us when we admit that we have all fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The Pilgrims recognized that without the help of the Wampanoags, even more of them would have perished that first winter. These kernels can remind us be thankful for all those who have helped us ... and to pay it forward by assisting others.

A friend posted on FB an idea she stole from another friend.

"... This morning on my way to work I saw a person all wrapped up in a sleeping bag sleeping on a bench in front of Walgreens. He had probably been there for a while, and it was cold last night.... It was a reminder to me that I need to stop [complaining] about the petty [stuff] in my life. And get back in the habit of doing a secret thing I used to do after I stopped working at the homeless shelter. I used to buy gift cards. Lots of them. Every time I filled up my car I would buy \$10/15 worth of gift cards. A trip to the drugstore to buy [little stuff] I didn't need would be another \$10/15 in gift cards. Subway for lunch— gift cards. Grocery store—gift cards. Sometimes when I had a stack I would drop them at the shelter. Sometime I would just give them to people I saw who looked like they needed them. You can't change a person's life with a \$5 gift card, but a small act of kindness shows people that they are not invisible. And you know, I never missed the money I spent."

I encourage each of you to take the five of corn that you've received. As you leave, i invite you to leave one on the altar as a thank offering to God. Take the other four and give them to people in your life for whom you're thankful, making sure to tell each one exactly why you're grateful.

I have five kernels. Besides leaving one here and sharing the others, here's what else I'll do:

- Even though it may not be true, I'm going to remember the story of the five kernels.
- I'm going to be thankful that I'm warm and have plenty to eat.
- And that my son and his wife are coming to the McIntosh family Thanksgiving celebration.
- I'm going to give thanks by giving to others. On November 28th, I'll sit down with my laptop and find all sorts of fun ways to give away money through UMCOR (that is, the United Methodist Committee on Relief). Maybe I'll do Guatemala Stove Builders again, or maybe women's health or urban justice or disaster response or... well, you get the idea.¹

And I'm going to be thankful.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.umcor.org/Search-for-Projects>