



Prez Release

Thanksgiving Day November 2004

Thanksgiving Day is a part of the American fabric. Colonial times and governments saw various special days set aside for Thanksgiving. In 1863, it was President Abraham Lincoln who proclaimed that the last Thursday in November be set aside to give thanks to God. While the height of a conflict as tragic as the Civil War is not a period of time that seems to be ripe for a thanksgiving proclamation, Lincoln saw the perspective of Thanksgiving was best encouraged when it seemed affairs of life were most desperate.

I recently had a small glimpse of what Lincoln must have faced. My brother and I conducted the funeral of a cousin who had been struck down by a swift-growing pancreatic cancer. We were both numb as we stood on the Nebraska prairies to conduct this final farewell. Though Dawes County Nebraska is sparsely populated, 400 people came that bright Saturday morning to remember a life that had been snatched way too early in its living. I have conducted countless funerals in 32 years as a minister, but when it is family, my role as a minister no longer protects me from grief. I stood there wondering what to say in the face of the crushing loss of my cousin Neil Daniels. There is a sense of finality that such an event emits and the emotion of standing in close proximity to the burial place of my maternal grandparents and great grandparents and my own father, caused me considerable emotion.

But as I looked at 400 people who had come to honor someone they respected and loved, I realized that the sorrowful finality of the moment was balanced by the incredible investment in virtue and integrity my cousin had made. He had been on the volunteer fire department, the emergency rescue unit, he had been mayor of the small city he lived in and had conducted a real estate business in the community for years with a reputation of fairness and integrity. The remembrance of my cousin's too short life filled me with thanksgiving, not only at the memory of his life of worth, but at the realization that it represented the simple, but powerful, elements that create a civil society worth affirming.

Thanksgiving was the sentiment of the moment because the stark realization of the 400 people standing on the Nebraska prairies was that, while our sorrow was overwhelming, a life of value and integrity actually had trumped our grief. It did not stop the tears, but it did balance the equation of life. The numbness caused by the suddenness of death could not keep the accounts of my cousin's life from being told.

“He was always fair in business.” “He took his role in the volunteer fire department so seriously.” “He was proud of his community.” One police officer said to me, “Your cousin was a class act.”

This essay is not merely an emotional reflection on a poignant moment in my family’s life. It is a testimony to the simple fabric of what can make life in America rich and prosperous. The heartland continues to take its fair share of patronizing and cynical analysis from the coastal centers of sophistication. I would submit that the substance of a well functioning civil society is not complex in its composition. Fair play in business and integrity in personal relationship creates a reservoir of social capital that undergirds a civil society. The cousin my brother and I eulogized on that crisp autumn morning lived a life filled with the substance of what makes America a great place to live.

As Lincoln navigated a “valley of the shadow of death’ in the mid-1860’s he understood that an attitude of gratitude was something that would stand himself and the entire nation in good stead, though sorrow swirled around him. I was reminded of the value of that commodity of thanksgiving at the funeral I conducted. This Thanksgiving 2004 is another opportunity for all Americans to be grateful and be reminded when we sing, “America, America, God shed his grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”

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