

Giving Thanks in Ordinary Time

(Column 149: October 2, 2025)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

If most people were asked to describe a “typical” or aspirational Thanksgiving celebration, they would likely describe a scene such as that portrayed in Norman Rockwell’s iconic 1943 painting, *“Freedom From Want.”*

This painting is frequently reproduced at this time of the year, and it is widely familiar. It depicts a pair of beaming grandparents at the head of a dinner table. Grandpa is formally dressed in a suit and tie, while Grandma is wearing an immaculately clean apron and bearing a perfectly cooked turkey. The family table is set with beautiful dishes. All members of this multi-generational family glow with joy as they gaze at each other or at the turkey-bearing grandparents with peace and love. No signs of family tension, divisive political debates, distracting electronic devices, or paper plates at this table! The winds of war swirling around the world in the 1940’s did not intrude on this tableau of happy family life. The picture captures an ideal vision that many have of this beautiful holiday filled with celebrating family and expressing gratitude for all of our blessings.

“Freedom From Want” formed part of a quartet of pictures that Rockwell drew to portray the “four freedoms” that President Franklin D. Roosevelt referenced in his 1941 State of the Union address. In its companion pieces, *“Freedom from Fear,”* depicted parents tucking their sleeping children into bed. The children slept peacefully and free of fear, while the father of the family held in his hands a newspaper filled with headlines announcing the horrors of the war years. In *“Freedom of Speech,”* Rockwell presented the image of an ordinary man dressed in his work clothes, confidently standing up to speak his mind at a town hall, even though he was surrounded by a sea of other participants in business suits far more elegant than his own garb. Finally, in *“Freedom of Worship”* Rockwell sketched a collage of people, all dressed differently with their eyes closed and praying to God in their own ways.

But, it is *“Freedom from Want”* that is the most widely known of these pictures. It proposes the Thanksgiving to which many aspire -- and that many find intimidatingly perfect. For those whose grandparents are no longer at the heads of their tables, whose family gatherings are fraught, whose tables are not laden with abundance, and whose circle of loved ones is painfully small or missing, Thanksgiving might be tinged with sentimental longing. This can overshadow the beauty of the gratitude that this holiday is intended to celebrate.

There is another, less famous Norman Rockwell painting that captures the beautiful simplicity of Thanksgiving in a way that can be better appreciated by those whose Thanksgiving celebrations might be a little less than perfect or those who seek the deeper spiritual side to the day. *“Saying Grace,”* a 1951 Rockwell painting depicts a simple, crowded diner with no tablecloths, no fine dishware and no fancy furniture. At a small,

crowded table for four, two young men sit on one side of the table, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, wearing rumpled clothing that may indicate a wild evening the night before. They are glancing somewhat furtively across the table at two other characters who are the focal point of the picture. A woman wearing simple clothing and a young boy in her charge are sitting close to each other. Their heads are bowed in prayer as they say grace and express their gratitude for the simple meal that sits on the trays in front of them. In this private moment of prayer in a crowded diner, they seem oblivious to the crowd that surrounds them, while in various ways the other patrons steal glimpses of the prayerful pair, not sure what to make of this moment.

This painting, to me, perfectly expresses the simple, joyful hope of Thanksgiving. Yes, the blessings of family, friends and feast are parts of the holiday that I anticipate so eagerly and for which I am counting the days.

But, there is something peacefully comforting about “*Saying Grace*.” It is a reminder that Thanksgiving is still Thanksgiving even when or if it lacks the trappings we hope it will have. It is a reminder that it is gratitude that is the reason for this celebration. It is a reminder that God is the center of this day, whether our observance of it is picture perfect or perfectly simple. It is a reminder that the grace of giving thanks is the heart of Thanksgiving – and a blessed part of our ordinary time.

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