

My Favorite Holiday

Holidays are subjective. My wife and kids say Christmas is their favorite holiday. My sister-in-law is crazy about Halloween. My other sister-in-law gets defensive if anyone claims there's a holiday better than the Fourth of July (she's the strange one in the family). For me, it's Thanksgiving. Here are four reasons why I love Thanksgiving:

IT'S UNIQUELY AMERICAN. Create a list of other countries that set aside a national holiday to stop and reflect on how good they've got it. While traveling in Rome over one Thanksgiving, my wife and I had an amazing dinner at a restaurant near the Doria Pamphilj Gallery. We overheard a couple at a table near ours and recognized them as being from the United States. When we finished eating, we quietly walked over and said, "We know nobody else will tell you this tonight, but happy Thanksgiving." They beamed and replied in kind. And all the Italians in the place thought we were weird.

IT'S THE START, NOT THE END. It's the day meant to get us in the spirit of the season it launches. It's the day we can no longer complain about holiday decorations going up. (Contrary to what retailers will have you believe, it is not the day to abandon one's family to trample others at a mall in order to get a good deal on a flat-screen TV.) But perhaps best of all, Thanksgiving comes before the First Sunday of Advent, a time of waiting and watching and wonder. It's the starter's pistol in the lead up to Christmas.

IT'S ABOUT SAYING THANK YOU, NOT PLEASE. In a highly commercial, secularized season, Thanksgiving has the ability to draw us together for one purpose: to give thanks. We remember and count our blessings. We aren't (if we're doing it right) demanding, or asking, or receiving. We're bringing and giving to others, even if all we're bringing is ourselves. Christmas is often referred to as a season of giving. The

fourth Thursday in November is the season of giving thanks. As German theologian Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you said was 'Thank you,' that would be enough."

IT'S ABOUT FAMILY . . . WHATEVER THAT MEANS. When my wife and I were first married, we lived in Washington, D.C., far from our families. We couldn't afford the airfare or the time off of work to fly home for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. So we spent the first Thanksgiving of our marriage in a tiny, one-bedroom apartment with our deaf cat (long story) while a turkey breast roasted in a three-quart crockpot. At midday, we made a phone call home, where our families were gathered together, missing us. We spend Thanksgiving with those we love who are near us. And they become family, if even for just that one day.