



Written by [Andrew Lane](#) on November 28, 2013

## Daily Ration Turned Remembrance: Five Grains of Pilgrim Corn

A full week was given to the first Thanksgiving feast in New England in 1621. Governor Bradford sent men to hunt deer and turkey and to call Massasoit's tribe to the Pilgrim's table. Out of this harvest festival came the American institution of Thanksgiving Day. It is peculiar to our people. No other nation has a celebration exactly like it. It does not honor a victory, mark a revolution, or commemorate the birth or death of a national hero. It is the great holiday of the common people. Thanksgiving is a national family celebration to thank God for the bounty wrought in liberty by our own labors.



Many descendants of the Pilgrims still follow the custom, begun on that first Thanksgiving Day in Plymouth, of placing five grains of corn beside each plate at the dinner table. Five grains of corn was the daily ration during those desperate days before the harvest when food was scarcely to be had. At each subsequent annual feast, the Pilgrims placed the grains at the table so that the reason for their rejoicing might not be forgotten.

The corn would remind them of the 63-day trip in the tiny *Mayflower*. It would speak to them of the days when there were only seven healthy colonists to care for the sick, and when already almost half their number were buried on a bleak and windswept hill. But the grains of corn would remind them of more than hardship and disaster. They would also recall that proudest fact of Pilgrim courage: that when spring came, and the *Mayflower* sailed home to England, every Pilgrim who survived the winter chose to remain in this new free land.

Each of the five grains of corn has special significance. The first grain reminds us that the earth is still good. This free land of our fathers yet pours forth its rich fruits and harvests into the hands of those who labor in it; it holds within its bosom vast reservoirs of power; it is a provident parent.

The second grain of corn should remind us of the Indians who befriended the Pilgrims and provided them with corn and squash that first dreadful winter, and taught them to gather clams and to catch fish. Had these members of another race, wise in the ways of survival in this world, not ministered to our forefathers, it is unlikely they would have survived. In listing our blessings, among those we would surrender last would be the love we share with our friends.

The third grain of our Thanksgiving corn recalls to us that "undefeated glory which is man." Courage, we know, is a part of the armor of every great man. If we are "armed with a dream worthy to be believed," and with a courage sufficient for the hour, even we may do great things. Observe the scene more clearly. The winter had been severe, death a frequent visitor, and from England family voices called. But when the *Mayflower* returned, the colonists remained.



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Certainly this scene has a special message for those who seek of life mere refuge. Today there are among us those who say they would leave this land if there were but some last, free place to go. They are, they complain, weary of battling escalating collectivism. Such Americans need to be reminded that even when life was almost unendurable, the Pilgrims stayed. Let us thank God for those patriotic men and women who yet refuse to bow to the forces warring against our liberties, who remain in the fight, who will not yield.

The fourth grain of corn reminds us that the Pilgrims came “to lay a foundation for the kingdom of Christ in these remote parts of the world.” Freedom of conscience and religion was not simply a motto to them; they exercised their conscience to practice their religion. They prayed in their homes ... and their schools. They saw their freedom to do so as far more important than their physical comforts — or even food and shelter.

That last grain of corn in the Pilgrim’s Thanksgiving pentad represents the most compelling reason to be grateful. It is the fact that at the center of our universe Creative Love still holds all life together. Out of that belief grows the faith of the Christian family and the Christian nation alike. Out of it, also, grows the assurance that His Kingdom will yet come. We may have a larger part in bringing it than we realize or want.

Christian leadership can seem a burden. Yet, have we not sought our chance to make a better world? Our forefathers came here to fulfill such a purpose. They thought they could do it by taming a wilderness. Perhaps God has now provided a sterner mission for us. Let us be thankful for His faith in us, that He has given us our chance to preserve those liberties which are our most precious heritage.

The meaning of the grains of corn can be recited briefly. We can rejoice in an earth still good, in friends still loyal, in a courage undefeated and in a freedom still largely unimpaired in our Father’s world. But there can be no true Thanksgiving, we must remember, without sacrifice. Our gratitude should lead to joy, and our joy to a renewed commitment to our God, our family, our country. With this must go our prayer that the Infinite Father in His great goodness may use both us and what gifts He has given us in the noblest cause of our time, the preservation of Christian civilization.

*This commemorative essay, originally entitled “Five Grains of Pilgrim Corn,” appeared in the November 22, 1972 issue of The Review Of The News, a predecessor of The New American.*

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