

A day of mourning each November

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by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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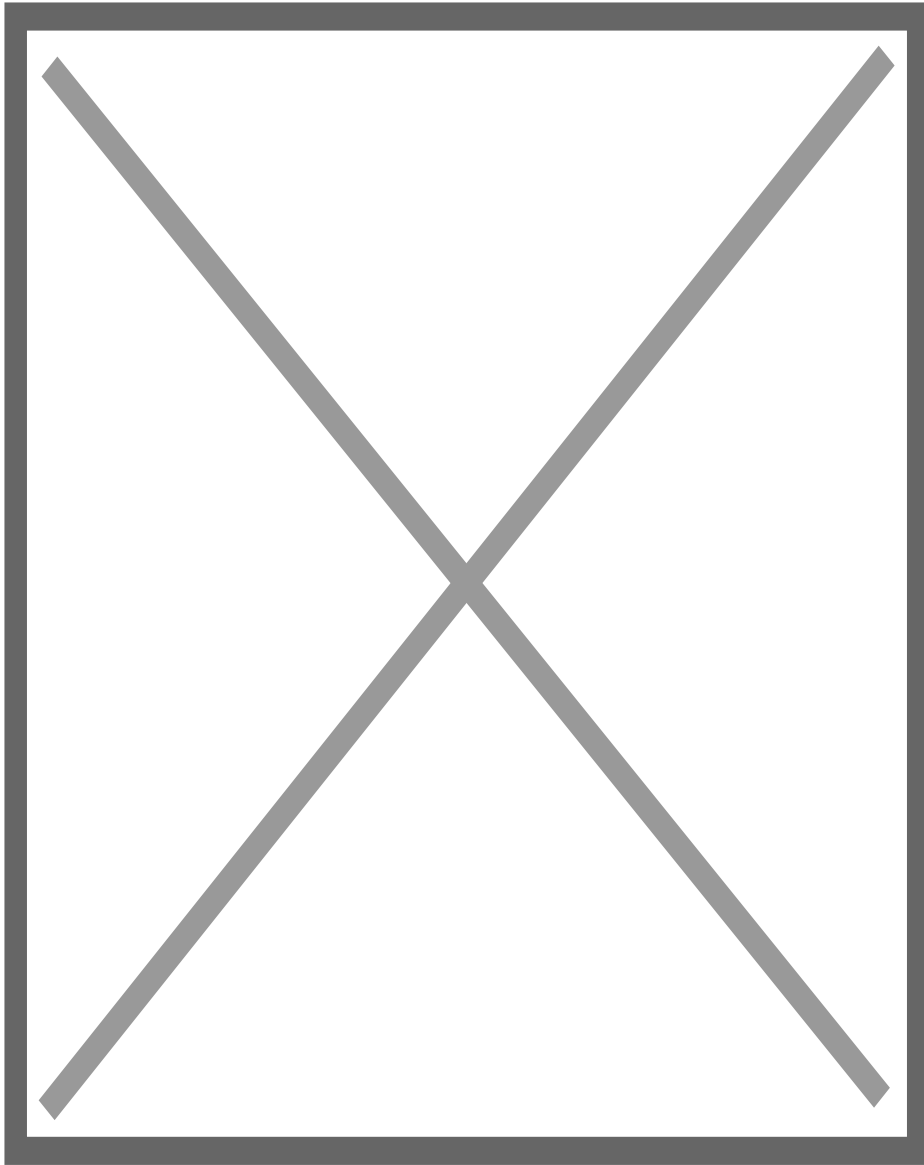


Illustration by Jamiel Law

It's Thanksgiving time again. Across the nation, people will gather for ecumenical, interfaith, and civic services of gratitude, prayer, and reflection. Someone may read Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation; a school choir may sing; village officials and local religious leaders may speak. And often a Native American from the

community is asked to give a land acknowledgment or read a poem.

I've been asked to be that person more than once, because I'm a tribal citizen who is also a Christian minister. And more than once, I've declined. Inviting a Native person helps perpetuate the myth of the first Thanksgiving, of a happy harvest meal shared between the tribal people of the Eastern Seaboard and the settlers of the Plymouth Colony. The Native person is invited to participate in a performance of shared gratitude, glossing over the question of whether the arrival of the Pilgrims was entirely innocent. I'm not interested in perpetuating that myth.

The myth owes less to any historically reliable account than it does to [the painting *The First Thanksgiving 1621*](#), one of a series Jean Leon Gerome Ferris created in the early 20th century to depict US history and life. Because these paintings were reproduced and widely distributed, many Americans have seen *The First Thanksgiving*. It depicts an aproned Pilgrim woman graciously serving bread to a group of Native men seated on the ground. To her right, a group of Pilgrims and a man dressed as a conquistador gather around a table. The Native men are depicted in stereotypical dress associated with 19th-century Northern Plains tribes. A Native woman in a buckskin dress stands in the background as a Pilgrim woman speaks over her shoulder, seeming to offer some kind of instruction. On the perimeter, Pilgrim men with muskets watch sternly.

Why would they need muskets? Why aren't the Native men seated at the table? The painting portrays Natives as subservient and needy, objects of the charity of the civilized, well-fed settlers keeping an eye on them. When Ferris painted it, many Native people were hungry, forcibly removed from tribal homelands, driven onto limited reservation acreage watched over by armed US soldiers, dependent on food rations and a government that would uphold its treaty promises erratically at best. The painting captures early 20th-century sentiment, not 17th-century history.

A more recent monument tells a different story. In 1998 a plaque was erected in Plymouth on behalf of the United American Indians of New England. It offers the point of view of the Wampanoag people, who inhabited what is now Rhode Island and Massachusetts for 12,000 years and continue to live on a portion of their homelands today. "Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European settlers," it says. "To them, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of their people, the theft of their lands, and the relentless assault on their cultures."

It goes on to explain that the fourth Thursday of November is observed as a national day of mourning among many Native people; each year a somber protest gathers in Plymouth. The plaque presents a counternarrative to the popular, romanticized story of the first Thanksgiving.

But people resist this counternarrative, too. Last year I came across a social media thread in which people from my denomination—which descended in part from the Pilgrims—were sharing ideas for Thanksgiving services. Someone else lamented that once, long ago, Native Americans and colonial settlers had shared in Thanksgiving feasts, and why couldn't we "get back to that"?

Sometimes I feel my ancestors encouraging me to walk away from a thread. This time they told me to reply. So I described the plaque in Plymouth and its content.

In response, I was told that the Pilgrims came seeking religious freedom, and because they were oppressed elsewhere, they could not have brought harm to others. They bore no responsibility for the impact of their arrival on Native nations—disease, a succession of colonial wars, missionary activity that tried to eradicate Native languages, spiritualities, and cultures. So Congregationalist descendants can be absolved of any need to consider the perspectives of the Wampanoag and other Native nations who have said that the harms of the Pilgrim arrival are ongoing.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have called these defenses and legitimations “settler moves to innocence,” strategies that settler descendants make to distance themselves from colonialism’s ongoing harms even as they often purport to have concern for Indigenous people. Canadian Mennonite scholar Elaine Enns details several of these strategies in her book, coauthored with Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*. She encourages the difficult work of moving from “narratives of innocence” to “response-ability,” the ability and willingness to “stay engaged and present,” noticing “how we reflexively turn to strategies of defensiveness and denial” in the face of narratives of harm. Enns frames these strategies as an unclean spirit to be recognized and named.

This unclean spirit is legion, and it shows up especially this time of year. Its power over the myth of Thanksgiving is persistent. In my denomination we do this by appealing to the Pilgrims’ intent. But as Enns notes, the invitation is always open to allow the demon to be cast out through the examination of these haunted religious histories and our ongoing evasions.