

A Month of Living Gracefully
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October 31, 2010

1 Corinthians 10: 31 "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God."

Mark 14:22-24 "While they were eating he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

In a different life, I want to be a farmer.

I suppose it's possible that I WAS a farmer in a past life (if you go in for all that stuff). My great-grandfather was the one who got OFF the farm in Missouri; and went and became a Methodist preacher. He served a number of different churches around central Illinois. That is where his sons settled into the more urban environments. But farming was always in their blood. My grandfather had a tremendous green thumb, and would show up at camp every summer with a trunk filled to overflowing with delicious sweet corn he would stop and pick up from the roadside stands en route to northern Wisconsin. When I was a teenager, my mother would send me down to "help" my grandparents, but what really happened was my grandfather would work laps around me, pointing to the new places he wanted to move the rose bushes, or which spot of ground needed to be turned over for his new patch of bulbs.

I've made no secret of my new-found appreciation and love of dirt. In my August sermon, "Sacred Cows and Screen Doors" I shared with you how planting a garden opened my eyes to a new vision of God's presence in my life, and in this world. Just last week I planted my second year of a winter garden. Unfortunately my dogs also have a deep appreciation for the cool earth, and they destroyed it in no time at all, digging for the cold spots. But I'm not willing to give up that easily. Garden 2.0 was planted on Monday, this time with a FENCE around it, AND I'm venturing into unknown territory, as I've started three whole flats of new seeds of cauliflower, lettuce and swiss chard. This year's garden has the potential to be enormous; and with the amount of money I have now invested into it, I pray that we may get a few decent meals for all the hard work put in.

But again, it's that call and that connection; God's presence is palpable when you hold in your hand the miracle of food nurtured by you but provided by that great mystery of God. It is a miracle to behold, where once there was an itty bitty little seedling, but now there is a beautiful and lush head of lettuce, or broccoli, where before there was none. It is still a fascinating process to me that leads to nothing but wonder and amazement.

This newfound wonder and amazement made my practice of praying before every meal relatively easy. I say relatively because there were, of course, a few rough spots in my new practice.

First off, and I'm not ashamed to say it, I personally don't think I'm a very good spontaneous prayer. Remember, I was an actor in high school and college, so my preference is to have the words written out for me. I like to practice what I preach (literally). This sermon? I've already practiced it three times. So spontaneous public prayer three times a day was a challenge for me.

Another challenge of saying grace before every meal was going out to a restaurant. If you are a restaurant pray-er, God bless you. This was a new experience for me and was a little disconcerting. When we went out to lunch with my parents, I cheated and did more of a "blessing pronouncement" than an actual grace. I thought it worked, but Tracy scolded me and said, "if you're going to do it, then just own it." But this was my practice, not hers.

My last major challenge was that of creating habit. I was not used to saying grace at every meal, and a few times, I just plain forgot. Fortunately Tracy gave me this silly band to remind me. What is interesting is that the few times I did forget were the times when the presence and spirit of God were closest. The first was the morning after Remy was born. The second was the light lunch provided after the funeral service I preformed for a family friend. Maybe the spirit of God was so close at hand that words weren't needed to express my love and gratitude. Or maybe this human vessel was worn thin and needed a pass. Either way, I think God will forgive my transgression. (My fellow ministers? Maybe not, so just to be safe I prayed a few extra meals, just to be sure I got my 90 in- even when we went to Walt Disney World).

So those were a few of the rough spots; but overall I would say that this has been a tremendously worthwhile practice to take on. Over the course of my 90 graces, I have learned that a good table grace does three things. The first is simply to give thanks to God, for God's presence in the food. The second is to recognize the significance of THIS moment of life, a snapshot of the now, and witnessing God's presence in it. The third, and this is the tricky one, is to send forth with a blessing.

Each action of table grace is important. Breakfast is a good sending forth grace. An example would be asking God for strength and fuel to face the day's challenges. If I knew I had an important meeting that day, I would ask for the strength of wisdom. If I was feeling a little sensitive around certain people, I would ask for the fuel of love and compassion. It provided a way for me to invite God into my life, and to recognize the presence of God in the food being provided. It was like filling up those peaches on my plate with good will and God's gifts.

An example of the second piece of a good grace-- of appreciating the moment when this meal takes place-- became most clear to me thanks to the perfect timing of Remy's birth. Because you overwhelmed my family and me with your love and your cooking. In every casserole, chicken dish, cream cheese spread, taco creation and spoonful of rice, we paused and remembered YOU, the loving hands of friends and fellow UCGers who brought food to our table. You, who cared for us at a time of need. Thank you all for that; and know that we offered a prayer of gratitude for every one of you. I also became aware of this when I ate breakfast at Perkins. I had just read the book "Nickled and Dimed" by Barbara Ehrenreich,

where she lives for a few months on minimum wage, so I was acutely aware of the people hustling around me, the wait staff making sure I had everything I needed; the bus boys clearing the tables, and the cooks behind closed doors, all working for minimum wage or less, with sore feet and backs, hustling to make a buck. In that grace I asked that God take special notice of our minimum wage workers. The food was standard fare that day, but I sure was grateful for the hands that put it in front of me.

My favorite piece of a good table grace goes back to my appreciation and love of the land. The recognition of the power and the presence of God in the miracle of this pear, this bread, this glass of milk. With the simple naming of the object, in my mind I could follow it's life back to the seed from which it came, or the field where it would graze. An apple is delicious, but an apple that has been plucked from a tree, placed in a bushel, carried to a cart, placed in a container, brought to a store, picked up by me and is now, sitting on my table, about to provide it's life for my sustenance; that is a delicious apple. That is an apple whose skin reflects the sunlight, whose meat has an extra crunch, whose nutrition will power me for the day and who is touched and cradled and cared for and provided by God every step of the journey. So I appreciate that apple. I love that apple. And I will see to it that that apples life will not go to waste this day.

The best part of my month long practice is the awareness that it brought to the food that I eat. In an essay by Wendell Berry, entitled "The Pleasures of Eating," Wendell speaks of the challenges to the American farmer when our urban dwelling population falls prey to the abstract idea of food. Food that loses its soul simply becomes another box on the supermarket shelf; another steak wrapped in cellophane with no previous existence other than the truck it was shipped in on. Eaters that are victims become mere consumers of products provided by corporation brands and industrialized systems that seek their own self interest rather than our own. Food becomes mere fuel; partially hydrogenated and condensed to its core components to provide the needed nutrients to allow the partakers to subsist. But Wendell offers a solution, a 7 step program to help us break the cycle of the food-ahaulic disease many suffer from.

1. Participate in food production to the extent that you can. Tear up your back yard, or plant some thyme in your windowsill. You wouldn't believe the flavor of a vegetable or an herb you grow yourself.
2. Prepare your own food. Bust out that sauté pan or have a "make your own pizza" party. You will be amazed by the gourmet living inside of you.
3. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home. The downtown farmers market it a lot of fun to go to, but sometimes it can feel like the parking lot outside of a Grateful Dead show. I like the Alachua Farmers Market at 34th and 441 on Saturday mornings. But, again, it's fun to mingle with the farmers, and go ahead and ask if you can come visit their farm. I'll bet you they'd invite you to their land.

This speaks to his 4th point, which is to deal directly with the local farmer, gardener orchardist whenever you can. Hailey West Edmington's the woman I get all my seed starts from and I met her right here at UCG. She was a childcare worker a few years back, and is now the owner and proprietor of Comet Farm. Our whole family loves to go

out there to pick up the seedlings she provides every fall and spring, if nothing else than to hob knob with a farmer and our friend.

5. Learn as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production, 6. Learn what is involved in the BEST farming practices and 7. Learn by direct observation and experience, the life cycles and histories of the food species you eat.

A few weeks ago, Dr. Geoff Dahl, the chair of the Animal Sciences department here at UF kindly went out of his way to give me an eye-opening tour of the UF Animal Sciences farms. It was awesome. He showed me the milk producing plant in Hague, the cattle and the 9 varieties of beef and the hogs they have on the ranch just south of Archer road, and finally, to the slaughter plant on campus. Geoff pointed out to me that while the Organic Milk I was drinking might be delicious, it also might be shipped to me from Colorado; and that the milk I can buy at my local Publix is most likely milked from UF cows that I met just up the road in Hague. He also let me know that their department sells their beef and pork every Friday afternoon, at very reasonable rates. Meat from cows that were raised right here in Gainesville. It was also good to learn that when we eat at Maude's or the New Deal Café, the beef they serve comes from right here, at UF. And those are some tasty burgers.

So, the most important question in all of this. How has my living 30 days of grace affected my relationship with God? Time and time again, as I offered my prayers before a meal, the image that returned to me was that of Jesus and his disciples, gathered around that supper table for the last time. And in taking up the simple elements, present of every table at almost every meal, Jesus took those most common things and made them uncommon. He brought an awareness to this bread and this wine that wasn't there before. In this simple meal, and in his decree that when we take part in it we remember him; remember God, remember the sacred life present in the world, our relationship with that world is strengthened, and the presence of God is made known once again. My 30 days of grace raised my awareness of the Living God. And, ultimately, the best part of this practice has been the sheer pleasure I have taken in appreciating God's presence in every peach, every spoon full of yogurt, every nook and crannied English muffin,, and every casserole, rice dish, and steak put before me. Amen.