

Smashing Idols
Our Worst/Best Thanksgivings Ever
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November 22, 2009
The United Church of Gainesville
Matthew 26:26-30

Larry: Thanksgiving could be called “The best of meals – the worst of meals.” At its best Thanksgiving is one of our purest holidays – no gifts, no doctrinal divisions based on religious lines – just an opportunity for family and friends to gather for a meal. At its worst, consider the Thanksgiving episode of the TV show “Friends,” from 1998, which continually ranks as one of the most popular episodes in the series.

Briefly, Ross arrives for Thanksgiving dinner complaining that since he has just been divorced and evicted from his apartment, this is his worst Thanksgiving ever. Chandler replies that he can’t even eat turkey on Thanksgiving because that was the meal when his parents told him they were getting a divorce. Phoebe counters with her own story of her worst Thanksgiving, but she is disqualified because this turns out to be from a past life. Joey recalls the Thanksgiving he got a turkey stuck on his head. Rachel remembers the time Monica dropped a knife, severing Chandler’s toe, and when they got to the emergency room to reattach it, Monica had brought a carrot rather than the missing digit.

Vince: Our scripture this morning recounts a first thanksgiving meal. What we call communion, other Christian traditions know as the Eucharist, from the Greek word *eucharistai*, meaning “to give thanks.” When I read our scripture this morning, what sticks out for me is the ordinariness of this meal. This is a real meal, with real food, shared by real friends, at a real table.

Yet, growing up, my church, like many others, celebrated with tiny squares of a Wonder-Bread-like-substance. These cubes were heaped into a brass plate and passed down the pews, after which followed another tray with plastic thimbles full of grape juice, and at a designated moment everyone knocked back their grape shot in a synchronized motion. This solemn and joyless ritual bore little relationship to an ordinary meal. In our attempts to make communion more than a meal, we made it less.

I think something similar happens in a lot of Thanksgiving celebrations. Thanksgiving morning at my house growing up was inevitably the occasion for a fight. The frantic, early morning rush to make a dish and get the kids ready for our two-hour drive to Ohio made blood pressures rise and tempers flare. Unfailingly, it was at the moment of getting into the car that everything boiled over, and the first 15 minutes of the ride were a terrifying reminder why one should not drive angry.

I imagine some of you have had similar experiences. The pressures of the perfect meal, the perfect day, the perfect family are a recipe for imperfection. Add to that everyone’s insistence that you constantly demonstrate how thankful you are for the whole debacle, and Thanksgiving can become

downright overwhelming. This Thanksgiving idol is frequently represented by Norman Rockwell's image in which a happy family eagerly awaits the perfect roast turkey. Rockwell's painting was originally commissioned to justify US involvement in World War II. The caption in the Saturday Evening Post read, "Freedom from Want: ours...to fight for." Rockwell celebrates the idolatry of food, family, and country all rolled into one juicy bird.

Sometimes our refusal to attempt the perfect meal, whether Eucharist or Thanksgiving, our defiance of these idols, allows the Spirit to enter, and an ordinary meal can become something more. In the fall of 1988, perhaps tired of the annual Thanksgiving fight, my parents decided to take advantage of one of those free vacation packages which include a high-pressure sales pitch for a timeshare or condo. They certainly could not afford a timeshare, but with children ages 3, 5, and 7, they could not afford a vacation either, so we went. Just where did my parents whisk us off to, you ask. What paradise hosted Thanksgiving '88? Hawaii? The Caribbean? The Sunshine State? No, it was a much more exotic locale, the beautiful and world famous French Lick, Indiana. The evocatively named, French Lick, is an historic resort community perched atop a system of hot springs and also the childhood home of basketball star, Larry Byrd.

I'm not sure what my parents thought we would do there. We were a poor, young family, headed to a resort known for hot springs, spa facilities and golf- three activities enjoyed by children everywhere. As the week dragged on, the hotel pool held less attraction, and the tight quarters and high-pressure sales pitch began to fray nerves. If we had come to avoid a family fight, we failed miserably. On Thanksgiving evening, not having the money to eat in any of the hotel's restaurants, we began to search the streets of French Lick. All the shops were closed as we continued circling, growing hungrier and hungrier. At long last we found an empty Pizza Hut and had Thanksgiving dinner. I don't remember exactly what we got, but I'm pretty sure I was in my Meat Lover's phase. I remember the transformation of that awful day around the red and white checked table cloth and the transformation in my family as our blood sugars rose and we decided to finish out our worst Thanksgiving by taking in the new movie, *The Land Before Time*, at the tiny theater on Main Street.

More than the experience of that evening, I remember the endless retellings of this horrific holiday over the years, the laughter we share each time, and the meaning that that meal has taken on for our family. That meat lover's pizza bears a rich symbolism for the AmFam that no turkey ever could. It is a symbol of our love for one another, our ability to get through difficult times, and our poor dietary choices.

Larry: My bad Thanksgiving story was the year Sandy's brother, Rick had moved to St. Simon's Island, Georgia and invited all of us, along with Sandy's mom who had recently moved to Gainesville, to come up there for the holiday. I don't know what was going on with Rick's wife, who is now his ex, but I suspect a fight, because when we got there, Louise announced she wasn't cooking and we went to the King and Prince Hotel on St. Simon's for their Thanksgiving buffet.

That put me right in a bad mood, because on Thanksgiving I'm an eat-a-turkey-at-home traditionalist. To make matters worse, we had to wait an hour to even get inside to get on line to eat, which meant now there were three grumpy males in our family, our two adolescent sons and me. To top it off, when we got to the buffet table, guess what. They were out of turkey.

I was in such a grump, that when Sandy asked me later to get her a piece of pie, I told her to get it her own.

But like Vince's story of the Nightmare at French Lick, this is one of the Thanksgiving stories I recall most regularly.

I think that broken stories leave room for the best healing. Theologian Walter Brueggemann likes to point out that Israel's best theology was done in exile, away from the comfortable thanksgiving table of Jerusalem. In their brokenness and defeat, Israel figured out who they were, not as conquerors, but as people who learned how to welcome strangers and how to be welcomed as strangers. That's when Isaiah wrote about being a light to all the nations, not just the chosen few. That's when they learned about justice for the poor.

I like Vince's comparison of Thanksgiving to that first communion. It is certainly a broken story, full of tired and grumpy men and women, arguing and scheming. Yet, it still holds the power for transformation.

Vince: One of my greatest communion experiences was in the final class of a worship course I took in seminary. The students designed the closing worship service, and it was the kind of disastrous worship experience that only seminary students can fashion. Prayers were confusingly worded and poorly punctuated; the liturgical dance was clumsily executed, and as the evening's soloist, I had laryngitis and could only croak through the music. We shared an awkward communion and sheepishly danced our way out.

But as we came back into the sanctuary to clean up, someone mentioned how good the bread for communion had been and how well it went with the wine. We gathered around the altar and began to tear off big hunks of bread, wiping the goblet dry, before refilling the glass and doing it again. Around the table we talked about how good the class had been and how much we appreciated the things that each person brought. In that moment we shared a true communion meal, ordinary food that became a sacred feast.

Larry: Real communion is often a little sloppy, with hunks of bread and sloshy goblets, and sometimes too much in our hands to hold at one time.

I love the ways we do communion here at UCG with all kinds of bread and even rice cakes, grape juice and wine, the liquid often spilling on our shirts and baskets mistakenly going down rows twice. I love the many ways and places we share communion – retreats, Ash Wednesday, Christmas Eve, and at times encountering certain bumps along the way.

Ask any long timer around here about the time we discovered at 9:30pm on Christmas Eve that we had forgotten the bread for communion at the 10:30 service. We sent out runners on a kind of Christmas communion scavenger hunt who came back with everything from fruitcake and pumpkin bread from home, to cheese crackers from the Gate gas station down the street, to those little thin wafers from First Lutheran Church just up the street.

Therefore let's remember that in our own lives our toughest times at Thanksgiving are the grist for the deepest thanks. After all, the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving followed the harshest winter of their lives when nearly half of their community died. Many of us have felt rather lost on our first thanksgivings in Florida, a long way from places we called home. Communion itself is the remembrance of a meal which was the most sacred and at the same time the saddest meal Jesus shared with his friends, for it was his last, and the time with them when one closest to him turned him over to the government for treason.

On this Thanksgiving, let us remember that no one next door is really having that Norman Rockwell family gathering that you imagine. Let's thank God not only for the best times in our lives, but thank God as well that the worst may turn out to be instruments of grace. Let's let the sad stories, the glad stories, the funny stories (the first Thanksgiving my sister Jean cooked for the family, she roasted the turkey in the plastic wrap, and this wasn't one that was supposed to be cooked in the bag!), the broken stories all run together and trust that this is indeed where God heals us, even if it may take some time to realize this.

And by the way, in that episode of Friends that promises to end with everybody mad at each other, Monica comes to Chandler's apartment later in the day asking for his forgiveness about the long-ago toe amputation by putting a turkey on her head. Chandler tells her for the first time, that he loves her.

That moment is like the recovery from a disastrous trip to French Lick with pizza for dinner, like laughing about the turkey cooked in melted plastic, and like my learning that Thanksgiving comes in all forms, for when I got up to actually get pie for Sandy at the buffet table, I discovered that they had finally put out the turkey at the King and Prince Hotel, and I was fine.

Those are the moments that give us the truest and deepest Thanksgivings. May your Thanksgivings, best and worst, all be blessed.