

Title: Preparing for Thanksgiving Dinner
Text: Ephesians 5: 15 – 20
Date: November 19, 2017

I don't know if any of you spend half as much time guessing where the sermon title will be leading us, as I spend coming up with sermon titles, but today's message is not intended to be a cooking show. Rather, I have in mind the wild, wonderful, and sometimes toxic mix of people who gather around the thanksgiving dinner table each year. I also have in mind the thought that we claim to be "a school of love." So then, aside from abstract thoughts of cosmic love, how can we prepare you for Thanksgiving in general, and weird Uncle Harry in particular.

You'll be comforted to know I have come up with a three point message. I need to warn you, however, that I won't be dividing my time equally between all three points.

First, be thankful. (This is the part you would expect me to say.) As you imagine yourself walking in the door to greet your extended family, Paul would have you "**singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" (Eph. 5:19 – 20) You got that?

My main man, Thomas Merton, writes in a wonderful book entitled *Thoughts in Solitude*: "**To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us, and God has given us everything. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience.**"

Wayne Muller adds an insightful twist to this when he writes: "**Gratefulness arises naturally from this fertile balance of honoring both our sorrow and our joy. We name our sorrows so that we can bring care and attention to our wounds, so that we may heal. At the same time we give thanks for the innumerable gifts and blessings bestowed upon us daily, lest we forget how rich we are.**" (How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions that Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives)

Second, "Do not get drunk with wine." (Eph. 5:18) Moving right along...

Third, be wise, grounded in your heart, and empathetic. This is going to take some explaining.

Let me tell you what is going on in my mind. Despite all our warm, Norman Rockwell-esque images of a loving family gathered around the Thanksgiving table, this is not the reality many people experience. As much as we might say we love our families, showing up for this sacred family ritual evokes a lot of stress for many. Even as our nation is divided, very often our families are divided as well.

It starts like popcorn popping. "**Can you believe what Al Franken did?" "That's nothing. How about that creep Roy Moore?" "Yay, well, this is all part of the culture of _____."**

And then as people gather around the walnut covered cheese ball, someone says something about guns. "**I read that in 2013, American gun-related deaths included 21,175 suicides, 11,208 homicides and 505 deaths caused by an accidental discharge. That same year in Japan, a country with one-third America's population, guns were involved in only 13 deaths.**" Then someone else chimes in, "**You better not start talking about taking away my guns! Guns don't kill people. People kill people!**"

It is stressful. It sometimes feels like a broken record. It sometimes feels like we have never been so divided as a country.

Since Shepherdstown has so many history buffs, I thought there might be some small consolation in recalling when our Thanksgiving holiday was actually established. It was on October 3, 1863 – right smack in the middle of the Civil War – that Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation establishing Thanksgiving Day. This day was not established to enshrine sentimentality. It was established in the midst of the greatest division and internal horror that this country has known.

The proclamation is far too long to read in its entirety, but I quote in part:

“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies... in the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity... [He goes on to recount the ways in which the country has continued to prosper.] I do therefore invite my fellow citizens... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent [God] who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that... with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.”

As we face our own divisions, I think it is helpful to remember *the context* in which this day was established! It was amidst real division!

So if we *are* committed to join in the family gathering this Thursday, how do we respond to Uncle Harry who has somewhat frightening political views? Oh, and did I mention that Uncle Harry claims to be a Christian too, and has been active in his church for many years? Oh, and did I mention that Uncle Harry seems to have had a little too much to drink?

Our extended families are a microcosm of our country. How do we respond? We are nowhere near ready to simply “declare unity.” The hurt is too deep, and the fear is too real. So rather than expecting unity, I would suggest we start by lowering the bar a little to work on empathy. Things are too fragile now to expect more. So then, trying to develop an entry point based on empathy might just be our first step towards “loving our neighbors.”

Our instincts are to scream: “What were you thinking?!?!? How blind could you possibly be on this!” Brené Brown has actually done some research on this. She argues compellingly that shaming does not change behavior. She says, “**Shame diminishes our capacity for empathy. Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.**” Researchers June Tangney and Ronda Dearing, authors of *Shame and Guilt*, explain that feelings of shame are so painful that it pulls the focus to our own survival, not the experiences of others. **Shame suppresses empathy.**

Adding to our list of concerns, we are hearing numerous, painful stories of hate crimes these days. It is in *that* context that Presbyterian pastor MaryAnn McKibben Dana writes, “**But I am interested to understand the appeal of Donald Trump to those who do *not* march in KKK parades or rip off hijabs. I’m interested in the people who sit in Presbyterian pews and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ preached every week. What did they find compelling enough**

about his message and plan that they were able to dismiss the very real and very disturbing rhetoric he proffered?" This is the deep work of developing empathy. Martin Luther King, Jr. writes: **"Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated."**

Parker Palmer also writes about developing empathy in his slim book entitled **"Healing the Heart of Democracy."** He says, **"Hearing each other's stories, which are often stories of heartbreak, can create an unexpected bond [between those with opposing political views]. When two people discover that parallel experiences led them to contrary conclusions, they are more likely to hold their differences respectfully, knowing that they have experienced similar forms of grief. The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy."** And while it may be hard for some of us to hear, he also writes: **"The civility we need will not come from watching our tongues. It will come from valuing our differences."**

Paul acknowledges that **"the days are evil,"** and exhorts us to live **"not as unwise people but as wise."** It seems like we need a great deal of wisdom to thread this needle. Develop empathy. Avoid shaming. Yet I am not asking you to abandon your prophetic voice. I did not say this would be easy.

Maybe some other week we can talk about changing the world. Today I am just suggesting that you see your family as a microcosm of the world. Today's homework assignment in this "school of love" is to practice loving Uncle Harry. As you pull up in front of the house, don't bound right in this time. Sit, and hold up Uncle Harry in Christ's light. Imagine, if you will, loving Uncle Harry. Ask for your own heart to softened – even though it is on fire for justice and righteousness. Since we are new at this, the good news is that this assignment will not be graded. We just don't want the assignment marked "incomplete."

This Thanksgiving practice on your family. Practice loving Uncle Harry. Our nation depends on it.

Amen.

Ephesians 5: 15 – 20

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,” making the most of the time, because the days are evil. “So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit,” as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, “giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.