

Saying Grace

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My earliest church experiences at St. Luke's Lutheran out on the prairie include memories of bounteous potlucks. Lime green jello salads swirled with carrots and mayonnaise on top. Platters of sliced ham on buttered homemade buns and multitudes of hot dish. Everybody had their own twist on macaroni, tomato sauce, ground beef in one baking dish. Sometimes people would actually add canned corn! There was no shortage of baked beans and scalloped potatoes. What was even more consistent than the bounty of foods was singing grace before the meal.

I can picture sweet Frances Lee (who was also the lunch lady at our two room school house and somehow also related to my mom) standing in reverence, and leading the singing:

*Be present at our table, Lord;
Be here and everywhere adored;
These mercies bless,
and grant that we
May feast in paradise with Thee. Amen.*

At home, we always said grace—
*Come lord Jesus be our guest
Let this food to us be blessed. Amen.*

In the summers, at Bible Camp, there were always table grace songs, written on big poster boards and posted around the dining hall walls. The tried and true favorite was Johnny Appleseed: *Oh the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain and the appleseed, the Lord is good to me....amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, AHHHHH men.*

As a pastor, it seems that I always get called on to say the grace at gatherings around the table. Except for those tables where, well, there are other folks who don't think women should be pastors or queer people should pastors, and then it is usually someone else who gets to say the prayer.

Have you ever been at a table when someone who is asked to "say grace" and they start to yammer on and on to God about everything? It's a bummer when someone starts to go on and on and on—that's usually a preacher.

How do you say grace?

The other night at dinner we raised a glass to Woody, our friend's recently deceased sweet plott hound; and to the goodness of friendship. Was that grace?

In an article in the Bitter Southerner, Ann Byrn explores the the tradition of giving thanks, or saying grace in the changing landscape of southern culture, especially on Thanksgiving. She notes that on this particular holiday, our tables are not confined to family, but they include friends, co-workers, neighbors, people from different cultures and faiths, or no faith at all. What is praying a prayer of thanksgiving in a multi-faith context, in this 21st century world? Does grace really matter any more?

Marcie and Bill Cohen Ferris, retired professors and non-religious celebrate the idea of blessing. Marcie says, “

“Blessings are a way to verbalize gratitude and, like the power of song, create solidarity within the group and say, something different is happening here...” Bill agrees, noting that asking for a blessing before a meal is a way to say we cherish each other's lives, and acknowledge that we feel blessed when we are all at the table together.

Rabbi Saul Strosberg of Congregation Sherith Israel in Nashville, believes “eating is a holy act that we put effort into and have gratitude for.” Grace is way to say God created the world and provides food for everyone, but it's a challenge to say that— because while we might be full and feeling well, you know not everyone in the world is full or feels well.

I wonder— when we we say grace is it also a subversive action towards justice and equity? By saying a blessing, we are asking to be strengthened to do our part to make the world better, that we need to recommit to feeding and nourishing not only one another at the table, but also those who would never be at our table~~the lonely, the downtrodden, our crabby neighbors and arch enemies.

American Muslim Amin Tomeh, says that blessings reconnect Muslims to the meaning of life which is that humanity is indivisible and wholly reliant on God. In addition Tomeh says, “As you consume, you are nourished, and you are connected to your fellow human beings. Muhammad says none of [us] are believers if [our] neighbors go hungry. We are responsible for making sure that those who are in earshot of us, our circle of acquaintances, are fed.”

“The Hindu religion and its blessings go one step further, not only calling on stewardship to others, but also to the world. Priest Pavan Kumar Kristapati of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta says Hindu blessings recognize the presence of God in the food. And before the meal is over, tiny pieces of food are taken from the plate and kept outside the plate to offer the food to all living beings, so even the ants don't go hungry.”

Kendall Vanderslice, an author and baker in Durham reminds us that “There is incredible intimacy when we eat together—I know it is complicated and uncomfortable sometimes at Thanksgiving, but when people commit themselves to awkwardness and

discomfort, that becomes the space for relationships.” Those relationships, she argues, could be an answer for the incredible loneliness felt by too many in the modern world. All people, she says, have food in common.

“Everyone shares this need to eat. And every time we eat, we recognize our reliance on something other than ourselves,” she says. “It allows us, simply, to be vulnerable.”

“Which, at the end of the day, is what any blessing should allow.”

Saying grace at Thanksgiving.

When I was in high school, I remember my church would give out little packets of five kernels of dried corn to encourage people to get their families at the table to say five things they were grateful for before they ate their holiday dinners.

I always wanted my family to do that, but could never convince them. It wasn't our way—we said “Come lord Jesus, be our guest...” which was brief and to the point, and not very vulnerable.

If you had to offer five gratitudes this Thanksgiving, what would they be, I wonder?

The table is always sacred space. No matter who is around it. To offer nourishment to one another, to break bread is an intimate and open-hearted act. To sit at anyone's table~~whether it is in the dining room, the kitchen counter, on the couch watching t.v. —is a sacramental act because it holds a holy mystery. This summer, When visiting my friend Mary Kay and her college age children, we peeled about 500 gillion avocados for homemade guacamole and mixed a giant bag of caesar salad from Wal-Mart and then sat on the couch together, eating while watching multiple episodes Midnight Mass on Netflix. We discussed each character and wondered at the profusion of symbolism in the sets, all the while polishing off the bowls of salad and avocados. It was bonding while being low key. It was special and ordinary. It was blessing and grace and mystery, that shared evening.

Some of us, this week, will receive and offer blessings at Thanksgiving feasts. They might be family tables, rife with division, or neighbors' tables surrounded by strangers, or even here, tables of people we know well and not so well. They all will be filled with saints and sinners and skeptics and shysters and beyond.

They all will hold blessing and grace in some way—even if it is only when people are not talking because they are too busy eating. Holiness is born from the alchemy of food and people and table.

Leo Bebb, the main character in the novel Love Feast by Frederick Buechner, speaks about the power of a feast as the embodiment of the realm of God. Leo Bebb is a flawed character of contradictions. An ex-convict and felon, he is the head of a religious diploma mill and the Church of Holy Love, incorporated. He is one of those people you mostly don't like and yet love. In his very long blessing at a table filled

with a rag tag assortment of humanity that encompassed the range of unsavory to lonely to innocent, he said: (and if it sounds familiar to you, it's because I have shared this before. It's worth hearing over and over.)

"THE KINGDOM of Heaven is like a great feast. That's the way of it. The Kingdom of Heaven is a love feast where nobody's a stranger. Like right here. There's strangers everywhere else you can think of. There's strangers was born twin brothers out of the same womb. There's strangers was raised together in the same town and worked side by side all their life through. There's strangers got married and been climbing in and out of the same fourposter thirty-five, forty years, and they're strangers still. And Jesus, it's like most of the time he is a stranger too. But here in this place there's no strangers, and Jesus, he isn't a stranger either. The Kingdom of Heaven's like this."

He said, "We all got secrets. I got them same as everybody else—things we feel bad about and wish hadn't ever happened. Hurtful things. Long ago things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like every one of us has lost his way so bad we don't even know which way is home any more only we're ashamed to ask. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and ask? Why, what would happen is we'd find out home is each other. We'd find out home is Jesus that loves us lost or found or any whichway."

Bebb is unlikely vessel for grace, and yet here he was, telling his people there are no strangers in the kingdom of God, and that we all lose our way and don't want to admit it; and that when we peel back a little bit of our self-protection, we discover home:

Where is home? In the eyes of each other, or in the hands that pass the mashed potatoes and in the love baked into the pumpkin pie and in the quiet moments of knowing that no matter who we are, we have been welcomed at the table.

This is the way we say grace, friends.

May we all share grace and goodness in the midst of all that is in these days.

Amen.

Frederick Buechner, *Love Feast*, Scribner Press, 1974.

Ann Burn, "Saying Grace" *The Bitter Southerner*, <https://bittersoutherner.com/our-ways-of-saying-grace>

