

Homily©
By Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, November 20, 2022
Welcome Table

I've always loved that song—"We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table." It sounds so—happy and cheerful—and it speaks to a theology that I believe in—that all people should be welcome—and that all voices should be heard—around the table. One of the things that has inspired me from the life of Jesus is his insistence on "Table Fellowship"—that is, the radical notion that people of differing races, social class, gender, age, occupation, could sit together at table, and those differences create a buffet of delicious options which feed our spirits.

This morning, we're just days away from the secular holiday known as Thanksgiving – also known by our Indigenous siblings as "Thanksgrieving." Over the years, most of us have come to reject the single story of Generous Indians and Grateful Pilgrims, knowing how complex and tragic this myth truly was and is. Yet secular traditions around sharing a meal together – often with family and friends persist. Hopefully there may be a lot joy at this gathering, but sometimes it can be a place where the political and religious divides emerge.

So, this morning, instead of a sermon, I'm offering you the story of a semi-autobiographical gathering from years past, when family would all converge at grandma's house for the Annual Thanksgiving Meal. This story is based in some truth – and some fictional elements of gatherings I've heard about from church members over the years. So... Imagine this with me:

Opening the door of their hybrid wagon is Emily and Tom, your vegan cousin and her husband and their twin boys. Just behind them, in pulls Uncle Ric and Aunt Ruth, followed by the assortment of aunts and uncles who are on a variety of low-fat, no-carb, no dairy, Atkins, Keto and Grapefruit diets; quietly coming into the house is fourteen year old Lisa who you wish would eat something, she's too thin...there's hugging and kisses and how are you's and "Where's Jim?" you ask no one in particular. Jim is your favorite cousin, the one with whom you have the most in common. Although he's been living with Michael for over 25 years now, his "roommate" has never been invited to the family gathering. "He said he was going over to his roommates house for Thanksgiving." says Aunt Ruth. "Don't know why he'd rather be there than with his own family, but, live and let live, I always say..."

Your niece Carmen shows up 45 minutes late wearing her Black Lives Matter t-shirt, and you're wondering which part of her body is pierced *this* Thanksgiving. After much buzzing around you finally gather around the table. You talk about the weather for a while—summer was too hot; the tomatoes didn't do too well this year; I think we're in for a bad winter... Then all the women except for Carmen discuss fashion—is that a new hairstyle? —aren't those fashions from New York just awful?

Somewhere down the other side of the table Uncle Ric and Uncle Jim—How 'bout them Vikings, eh? They are gonna crush the Cowboys! Carmen rolls her eyes...

A glow settles over the gathered clan as hands put steaming bowls of mashed potatoes and yams and Aunt Carol's famous Creamed Corn Bacon Casserole and the gluten-free stuffing cooked outside the bird for the vegans and all the things that we were told as children that native Americans helped the Pilgrims to prepare.

Of course all of this food is colonized but you know bringing that truth up would be such a downer—it could spoil the meal—*it really would*—so, we remember images from our past—of a table groaning with food and faces that usually look a lot like ours around the Welcome Table...

Emily and Tom are trying to feed the twins their tofu turkey and walnut loaf without getting too much in their hair. With the exception of Lisa, who is pushing food around on her plate, everyone is eating a lot now--and then, at the end of the table, you hear Uncle Ric say something about “those people” and you're wondering who “those” people are this time? --are those people ones who have a different skin color than his? --or maybe those people are gay, lesbian--he can't fathom bi-sexual or transgender--you brace yourself because you know what's coming—the familiar rant of “us” and “them” and “those people” and words like “work ethic” and “bootstrap” which leads us down the road of “sin” and “salvation” and “moral values.”

Oh keep the peace, you think to yourself. *I was actually enjoying myself this time*—enjoying the meal, making a connection with Carmen even though she has a—ah--oh God—is that a tongue piercing? Ric has the attention of the whole table now— “*You know what the trouble with this country is,*” you hear him saying, fork poised to make a point. “*We've lost our way as a nation. We lost our values...*”

You are feeling that familiar pit in your stomach as your dinner turns. You've been here before, feeling outnumbered, outgunned, if you speak up someone will dismiss you as a bleeding heart—as having no theology or moral values...and besides...they might ask you about what church you attend...though they've been told before, you can see your sister-in-law turning to you and saying “universalist...unity-arian...just what do ya'll believe anyway?” Your brother thinks he's coming to your defense and says “that's the church where you can believe whatever you want...”

“No—not exactly true,” you offer, but by this time, Uncle Ric is really on a roll. “We've got a chance in the next election to turn this country around. Close the borders. Support the REAL police, not the WOKE police. Stop teaching our children how bad this country is. Take PRIDE in the United States of America again! .” I know who I'm going to vote for come November 2024 he says, mouth full of mashed potatoes.

Oh no—now you *really* know where he’s going. Uncle Ric’s politics have been well-documented in the family before. You usually try to steer clear of it—to keep the peace. It’s the only time of year the whole family is together—and truly, family means something. Family is shared memories—and as you get older you’ve discovered those memories are precious. Even Ric is precious—he was the first one there with a winch and pick-up truck when you drove yourself into a ditch in a snowstorm—duct taped your bumper until you could get it to the shop—told you to get that bump on your head checked out.

But that was then, many years ago, and it’s Thanksgiving Day and he’s holding forth. First he starts talking about the solution to our oil problems – just go in and bomb ‘em all.. Wipe ‘em off the planet and take the oil. You gasp because surely he is just kidding. No one is laughing, though, in fact, his wife Ruth is nodding in her own quiet, determined way. Carmen has stopped eating now and is looking at Uncle Rick aghast. “Now Ric...” Grandma warns, knowingly. She knows where this is going too.

Nobody escapes his arrows—not the poor, who are all on drugs and are welfare kings and queens—why he even heard a story about some guy who was begging on the streets and then drove home to his mansion in his Mercedes...and then the blacks and the Indians who think they are entitled to reparations...*yeah, right*...he says...and shortly after that, he gets to the gays...God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve --two men or two women...well, that just ain’t right.

Carmen stands up, throws her napkin on the table, and stomps out to the back porch for a cigarette. “More turkey, anyone?” Aunt Ruth asks, before she starts clearing away the dinner plates. Uncle Bill looks half asleep—Lisa looks as if she’s about to cry—the twins are screaming and Emily takes them to the living room to breast feed—Uncle Ric would be mortified if she fed them at the table - and you open your mouth—God, how you wish you wouldn’t, but you just can’t help yourself....

“Uncle Rick—every time you talk about this, about poor people—about minorities—about gay, lesbian, trans people you talk about moral values. You say you’re all about the family—you’re against immorality. Would you like to hear about what I think is immoral?”

The table has fallen silent. The only sound is the coffee brewing in the other room.

“It’s immoral that a family of four has to sleep on the floor of a homeless shelter because they can’t afford their own place to live.”

“It’s immoral that some children go to bed hungry while others drive their SUVs to high school.

“It’s immoral to have the richest nation in the world hoard the world’s resources.”

It’s immoral to live in a world where black, brown, indigenous, Asian-Americans, and people of color are harassed, threatened, incarcerated and killed for what they look like;

And finally, you take in a deep breath, “*it’s immoral to deny health benefits of transgender children. And, you’ve spoken about family values – well, my family has values too.*”

“My family values families—all kinds of families

“My family values gay, lesbian bi-sexual and transgender and gender queer people as worthy of dignity and respect and the same rights and privileges as everyone else.”

“My family values protecting the environment for generations to come;”

“My family values honesty, truthfulness and transparency in politics;”

“My family values mean that *everyone*, and I mean *everyone* is welcome at the table. All kinds of people, Uncle Ric—even the ones that you find morally objectionable. I not only believe that’s the moral thing to do—I believe it’s what Jesus would have had us do too—if he were alive today. No one—not the rich Pharisees or Arabs or women or the tax collectors or the prostitute or the conservatives or the liberals were turned away from his table. And all I can say is that we should go and do likewise.”

Silence.

Carmen has come in from the back porch and is looking at you with a rare, wry smile. Emily and Tom are fussing with the twins, they seem embarrassed about the whole thing. Uncle Ric’s face is flushed—not sure if it’s all the red wine or turkey or your speech and Aunt Ruth is nowhere to be found.

And then—nothing happens. Aunt Ruth comes in with pumpkin pie. Lisa – the one never eats much --surprises us by taking a huge piece mounded with whipped cream on top. The conversation shifts to a discussion about whether or not Ruth’s pie could possibly be any better. Carmen looks over at you and winks. The rest of the evening doesn’t turn into a big argument, though you know it just as easily could have. Next time, it just might.

It’s a family tradition that when people start to leave, you hug them goodbye. You find yourself standing awkwardly in front of Ric—the bald-headed and big-hearted uncle you’ve known since childhood. It is so clear that he does not want to hug you. You look him in the eye, loving the parts of him that you can. “Happy Thanksgiving Uncle Ric,” you say, and you hug him anyway. You feel him stiffen, then, just for a moment, relax into the hug, almost hugging you back, then pulling away. “Happy Thanksgiving” he says gruffly, before pulling on his cap, and walking out the door.

For all these things—for the table full of food, for friends we choose, and sometimes, even for families we don’t—for the hope that all may one day sit down at the welcome table, eat and be satisfied—we give our thanks and praise.