

Thanksgiving “Surviving Thanksgiving with your Family”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Thanksgiving is a wonderful time of year however, regrettably, some families don't always get along as well as they should around the dinner table. So, I decided to look for advice that might be helpful. I found an article dated 2014 from a random website that I found a little entertaining. It is appropriately titled, “Surviving Thanksgiving with your Family”

The first rule the author gave, and I think we all know this intuitively, it is avoid talking about politics at all cost. This isn't always easy. Every family has an “Uncle Ben” or “Aunt Betty” who for some reason needs to discuss why anyone who believes in a different political party's point of view is a complete and utter moron. When this happens, the author suggest that when you hear key words and phrases that might start a fight, change the topic by using a rhyming word. For instance, (and recall that this is an article from 2014) if you hear the word Obama, change the topic to something nice about “Momma”. If you hear the words “climate change” start singing “Home on the Range”. If you hear the words Middle East, change the topic to “this delicious feast”, if you hear the word Palestine, talk about “the fine wine”. And if someone starts talking about Ebola, sing out “Ricola” and offer them one. If you hear someone starting to argue something about equal rights, change the topic by bringing up “the house poltergeist”. “Did anyone hear that creek in the attic?” The author concludes that if you change controversial words to rhyming words, she says, “Hopefully, they won't even notice.” It was a funny article. The advice is so crazy, it might actually work.

In truth though, you know who has the best advice to when it comes to surviving a Thanksgiving dinner if you have difficult family members? Hooray for St. Paul! He gives us sage advice in our second reading this morning. Think of this reading from St. Paul this morning as an inoculation, a kind of like a flu shot to prevent disaster this evening. This is actually good advice on how to live our lives in general, every day of the year. This is what St. Paul suggests, he says, “put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful.” That is what he says. That's pretty good advice for Thanksgiving, don't you think? I think St. Paul gives better advice than trying to come up with rhyming words for controversial topics, as entertaining as that would be.

Of course, whenever Thanksgiving comes around, I always think it is good to reflect on the question, “Who we are giving thanks to?” Don't you think? Who should we thank for the blessings we have received as a family, as a people, and as a country? It is good to remember that, for Christian folk like us, Thanksgiving isn't about giving thanks to ourselves; Thanksgiving is about giving thanks to God.

Our Gospel reading today accentuates this point, ten lepers were healed by Christ, nine of them thanked themselves, one returned to give thanks to Christ from whom all blessings flow. The one that returned to give thanks is the foreigner and I think this is an important point. How often it is that it is the foreigner or outsider who was invited into a family gathering that ends up being the most grateful for the invitation? Something to think about because there is still time to invite someone who doesn't have a place to be this evening.

You see, my friends, this Gospel reading underscores the importance of gratitude in life. Gratitude is such at the heart of Christian living that even the word Eucharist comes from the Greek word meaning "thanksgiving". At the heart of Christian worship is the need to be thankful to God and to each other; never taking anybody for granted, especially those who are closest to us. Secular culture tempts us to spend this Holiday thanking ourselves for our blessings by maxing out our credit cards on this, that or the other thing. I therefore challenge us all to begin our thanksgiving dinner this evening with a prayer of thanksgiving to God in a spirit of love and kindness for the other people at the table; perhaps every person in the family can have an opportunity at some point during the evening to share something that they are grateful to God for.

And, please, please, tonight not the time to pick a fight or a time to take the bait for one. The subtleties about Free Market theory and Keynesian Economics can wait for another day. This evening is a time to be grateful to God and for each other. It is also a time to remember the empty chairs of those who are not there, by distance or by death. It is also a time to thank our public servants, especially our men and women in uniform in our community or throughout the world, who can't be home this year for Thanksgiving. It is also a time to remember the grieving, the lonely, the hungry and the poor that they may receive our love and support. Most of all, it is a time to invite God into our homes this evening and into our hearts. We thank God for every blessing he bestows upon our family and nation, through Christ our Lord. Amen.