

Here's a letter written by a woman to her family inviting them for Thanksgiving Dinner.

Dear Family,

I'm not dead yet. Thanksgiving is still important to me. If being in my WILL is important to you, then you might consider being with me for my favorite holiday. Dinner is at 2:00. Not 2:15. Not 2:05. TWO! Arrive late and you get what's leftover.

Last year, that moron Marshall fried a turkey in one of those contraptions and practically burned the porch off the house. This year, the only peanut oil used to make the meal will be from the scoop of peanut butter I add to the carrot soup.

Jonathan, your last new wife was an idiot. You don't arrive at someone's house on Thanksgiving needing to use the oven and the stove. Honestly, I thought you might have learned after two wives – date them longer and save us all the agony of another divorce.

Now, the house rules are slightly different this year because I have decided that 47% of you don't know how to take care of nice things. Paper plates and Red Solo cups might be bad for the environment, but I'll be gone soon and that will be your problem to deal with.

HOUSE RULES: The 'no cans for kids' rule is now in force. We will be using 2 liter bottles because your children always open a third can before finishing the first two. Parents can fill a child's cup when it is empty. All of the cups have names on them and I'll be paying close attention to refills.

Chloe, last year we were at Trudy's house and I looked the other way when your JELL-O salad showed up. This year, if JELL-O salad comes in the front door it will go right out the back door with the garbage. Save yourself some time honey. You've never been a good cook and you shouldn't bring something that wiggles more than you do.

Grandmothers give grandchildren candy and cookies. That is a fact of life. Your little darlings can eat healthy at home. At my home, they can eat whatever they like as long as they finish it.

Salad at Thanksgiving is a waste of space. I cook with bacon and bacon fat. That's nothing new. Your being vegetarian doesn't change the fact that dressing without bacon fat is like egg salad without eggs. Even the green bean casserole has a little bacon fat in it. That's why it tastes so good. Not eating bacon is just not natural. And as far as being healthy, look at me. I've outlived almost everyone I know.

I do not like cell phones. Leave them in your car, or I will throw them in the toilet. And I mean it. Text at the table and I will smash your phone with a hammer.

Being a mother means you have to actually pay attention to your kids. I have nice things and I don't put them away just because company is coming. Mary, watch your kids and I'll watch my things.

Rhonda, a cat that requires a shot twice a day is a cat that has lived too many lives. I think staying home to care for the cat is your way of letting me know that I have lived too many lives too. I can live with that. Can you?

Words mean things. I say what I mean. Let me repeat: YOU DON'T NEED TO BRING ANYTHING means YOU DON'T NEED TO BRING ANYTHING. And if I did tell you to bring something, bring it in the quantity I said. Really. This doesn't have to be difficult or complicated.

In memory of your father, the back fridge will be filled with beer. Drink until it is gone. I prefer wine anyway. But one person from each family needs to be the designated driver. I mean that. HAPPY THANKSGIVING. MAMA.

As we celebrate a day dedicated to gratitude, we tend to look back over the past year and longer, and thank God for the special moments that have blessed our lives. If we are more spiritually mature, we are also able to thank God for the moments and experiences that challenged us and helped us to grow. So if I ask you, what was the greatest moment of your life, what would you say? What is the first thing that comes to mind? I obviously do not know all of you personally, but I know that there have been some extraordinary moments in your life: There was the moment you were born – when the clock of your life started ticking and you sucked in your first breath and the whole adventure started.

There was the moment you took your first step. From that moment on, you were a walker. Your world was never the same. Your mother's world was never the same.

There was the moment you spoke your first word. From that moment on, you were a talker. It may be that you started talking in that moment and haven't stopped since.

There was the moment you learned how to read, and a new world opened up to you.

There was the moment you got your first job, made your first friend, went on your first date, experienced your first kiss. Those of you who are married, remember your wedding and honeymoon; I remember clearly my ordination and first mass 39 years ago.

You remember the moment your child was born, the moment God became real to you, or the moment you discovered how much God had gifted you, and how much He loves you.

But I want to offer another candidate. I believe that the greatest moment in life is this moment right here. Right now. This beat of the heart. The greatest moment of our lives is now. Not because it is pleasant or happy or easy, but because this moment is the only moment we've got. Every past moment is irretrievably gone. It's never coming back. If we live there, we lose our life. And the future is always out there – somewhere. We can spend an eternity waiting for tomorrow, or worrying about tomorrow. If we live there, we likewise will lose our life.

This moment is God's irreplaceable gift to us. Most of all, this is the moment that matters because this moment is where God is. If we are going to be with God at all, we must be with Him NOW – in this moment. This is why one of the greatest books of spiritual advice ever written was given the inspired title THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT. A sacrament, we remember, is a 'means of grace.' It is an ordinary object – the water used in baptism, the bread and wine of communion – that somehow becomes the vessel of the extraordinary, of the divine. The man who wrote that book – Jean Pierre de Caussade said that each, ordinary moment of our lives can be a sacrament, a vehicle for God's love and power. "The present moment holds infinite riches beyond our wildest dreams, but we will only enjoy them to the extent of our faith and love....To discover God in the smallest and most ordinary things, as well as in the greatest, is to possess a rare and sublime truth."

In the same way that every lungful of air gives life to our body, every moment in time can – if we learn to let it – give life to our soul. THIS MOMENT is as God-filled as any we have ever lived. Frederick Buechner writes, “Morning, afternoon, evening – the hours of the day, of any day, of your day and my day. The alphabet of grace. If there is a God who speaks anywhere, surely He speaks here: through waking up and working, through going away and coming back again, through people you meet and books you read, through falling asleep in the dark.” (GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK, John Ortberg, p. 61-63) Today we give thanks for each and every moment.

Second, a word about country. Perhaps you have seen the comedian Yakov Smirnoff? His standup routine was based on his impressions of the United States after fleeing the Soviet Union. One thing that made a big impression on him was the sheer variety of choices in American supermarkets, after the empty shelves of Soviet-era grocery stores. Here’s one of his most famous bits: “On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk – you just add water, you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice – you just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, ‘What a country!’” (HOMILETICS, Jan-Feb 2015, p. 36-37) I say we all won the lottery just because we are in these United States. We are privileged citizens of one of the most affluent societies to ever exist on planet Earth. Brian Doyle writes: “I don’t know much, but I know this: this country, for all its muddle and wrangle, is the most extraordinary national idea that ever was, and it’s still possible that America will lead the way past mere power to a planetary peace that surpasseth understanding. No politician or poet will lead us there. It will be someone like you, yes you, hearing these words, or at the kitchen table or in the car while waiting for a dad or daughter, who creates ideas, who articulates and defends and shares them in the public market, who mills ideas into food and education and healing for thousands of people, who understands that power only matters, finally, when it is a verb. You who know full well, in the bone of your soul, that power that doesn’t work for the powerless is only flash and glitter, vanity and chaff, a hall of mirrors for staring endlessly and uselessly at ourselves, which is a waste of time.” (adapted from Brian Doyle, GRACE NOTES, ACTA Publications, p. 137) Whether we are happy or unhappy with our present political moment, one more reason we can be grateful that we live in America is that we have the chance to change it every four years. Today we give thanks for the gift of being in this country.

Finally, a word about the author of this day – God. Genesis got it right in the very first sentence: “In the beginning, God....” Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, spoke about the task of marinating in the “God who is always greater.” He wrote: “Take care always to keep before your eyes, first, God.” The secret, of course, of the ministry of Jesus, was that God was at the center of it. Jesus chose to marinate in the God who is always greater than our tiny conception, the God who “loves without measure and without regret.” To anchor ourselves in this, to keep always before our eyes this God is to choose to be intoxicated, marinated in the fullness of God. An Algerian Trappist, before his martyrdom, spoke to this fullness: “When you fill my heart, my eyes overflow.” (Gregory Boyle, TATTOOS ON THE HEART, p. 22) It seems to me that as we age, we find our hearts overfull – and our eyes overflowing on a far more frequent basis.

Recognizing how much we were given just in our very first breath, God can easily take possession of our hearts, giving direction to our souls, making us channels of the ongoing energy of creation. “A desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body,” Etty Hillesum wrote -- in a Nazi concentration camp of all places. “It is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling.”

A constant awareness of God connects us to the totality of the universe. It raises us above and beyond our tiny little selves to become part of the heartbeat of the universe. It gives life meaning and light. The

consciousness of God is what saves us from feeling alone in the cosmos. Otherwise we come and go, are born and go to dust – and all for nothing.

In each of us there is a memory of God. “We are not human beings trying to be spiritual,” Jacquelyn Small wrote, “We are spiritual beings trying to become human.” Because we were made by God FOR God, we have a God-sized hole in our hearts – and only God can fill that hole. You are here today because you understand this already. How could we have a national day of Thanksgiving without first giving thanks for the gift of life itself? (adapted from Joan Chittister, THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, LAWS OF THE HEART, p. 141-143) I’m so grateful that you have come to pray in gratitude this day.

Jesuit Gregory Boyle suggests a mantra to keep focused in delight on the person, the moment we have in front of us. It is from the words of Jesus to the good thief nailed next to Him on a cross. He essentially says, “This day...with me....Paradise.” It’s not just the promise of things to come; it is a promise for the here and now....with Him....on this day, in fact.....Paradise.” (TATTOOS ON THE HEART, p. 158-159)

It’s where we are at this moment, my brothers and sisters – with God – with one another – in this country at this moment – Paradise. How blessed we are. HAPPY THANKSGIVING. Amen.