

OK, it's that time for parties. So here are some holiday eating tips – hey, I'm concerned about your PHYSICAL health as well as your SPIRITUAL health!

1. Avoid carrot sticks. Anyone who puts carrots on a holiday buffet table knows nothing of the Christmas spirit. In fact, if you see carrots, leave immediately. Go next door, where they're serving rum balls.
2. Drink as much eggnog as you can. And quickly. Like fine single-malt scotch, it's rare. In fact, it's even rarer than single-malt scotch. You can't find it any other time of year but now. So drink up! Who cares that it has 10,000 calories in every sip? It's not as if you're going to turn into an eggnog-aholic or something. It's a treat. Enjoy it. Have one for me. Have 2. It's later than you think. It's CHRISTMAS!
3. If something comes with gravy, use it. That's the whole point of gravy. Gravy does not stand alone. Pour it on. Make a volcano out of your mashed potatoes. Fill it with gravy. Eat the volcano. Repeat.
4. As for mashed potatoes, always ask if they're made with skim milk or whole milk. If it's skim, pass. Why bother? It's like buying a sports car with an automatic transmission.
5. Do not have a snack before going to a party, in an effort to control your eating. The whole point of going to a Christmas party is to eat other people's food -- for free. Lots of it. Hello?
6. If you come across something really good at a buffet table, like frosted Christmas cookies in the shape and size of Santa, position yourself near them and don't budge. Have as many as you can before becoming the center of attention. They're like a beautiful pair of shoes. If you leave them behind, you're never going to see them again.
7. Same for pies. Apple. Pumpkin. Cherry. Have a slice of each. If you don't like Pumpkin, have 2 apples and one cherry. Always have three. When else do you get to have more than one dessert? Labor Day?
8. Did anyone mention fruitcake? Granted, it's loaded with the mandatory celebratory calories, but avoid it at all cost. I mean, have some standards
9. One final tip: If you don't feel terrible when you leave the party or get up from the table, you haven't been paying attention. Start over, January is just around the corner. (from an email from Shelayne Sutton)

Matthew's gospel begins with a birth narrative that follows the acorn-oak pattern. The larger dynamics that will shape Christ's life (the oak) are present in embryonic form at His birth (the acorn). Or we could view it as the overture that sounds the major themes that will be developed in the symphony of Jesus' life. We start with a scandal. Mary is pregnant and Joseph knows the child is not his. There are several lurid possibilities, but Matthew gets right to the point; the child in Mary's womb is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And a basic theme is stated. The work of the Holy Spirit emerges in human life as a scandal. During His life, Jesus will be considered a scandal. He will challenge the prevailing understanding of the law, eat with tax collectors and sinners, and make claims that sound like blasphemy. However what looks like a scandal on one level is really the work of God on a deeper level. Even in the womb Jesus caused scandal. We can expect that this will continue as He grows up. Joseph is faced with a dilemma; he had the right to expose Mary and have her stoned; this was the law. But he does not hold Mary in her shame, he tries to mitigate it. He acts on the

distinction between the person and the person's perceived sin. He is trying to respect the person and yet not undercut the purposes of the law.

This is another basic tension of Jesus' ministry. He will declare the center of the law is love of God and love of neighbor (Mt 22:37-39). That center should flow through and interpret every particular law – and how it is applied. But this is creative and deeply spiritual activity, and difficult work. In the tradition, Joseph is a carpenter. In spiritual teaching, carpentry is a way we pull together the pieces of life, fashioning a home for our truth. Joseph the carpenter is at work here, trying to build a response of love in a world of law. This man is an appropriate legal father for the child who will grow up and say the law should be fulfilled (see Mt 5:17-18), and with almost the same breath, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:20). The paradox is established: to fulfill the law you have to go beyond it.

But Joseph never gets to carry out his righteous plan of ‘quiet divorce.’ Instead, he is introduced to a new plan. He experiences a divine communication in a dream. In Matthew's birth story, Herod the king has to consult Scripture and priests to find out what God is doing. Joseph need only go to sleep, to move beyond ordinary waking consciousness and into deeper regions of awareness open to him. In other words, Joseph has direct, personal experience of divine intentions and activity.

This fact establishes a tension between tradition and experience. What tradition labels scandal, Joseph is instructed to call Spirit. Tradition says to divorce her; the dream experience says to take her into his home. Of course, this foreshadows the tension of all who will hear and be drawn to Jesus. Do we condemn gays – or love them as our own? Do we look down on the poor – or see in them our brothers and sisters who are struggling? Do we hide behind laws and fail to recognize that the illegal and alien are the Christ in our midst? Is Jesus and His teaching a scandal we should reject – or a manifestation of the Spirit we need to welcome and embrace?

We are also told that “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet....” St. Matthew assures us that this is all part of a plan. Through the prophet the Lord said this would happen, and behold, it is happening. The natural inclination to be ‘in on a secret’ is heightened. St. Matthew is letting us in on God's secret, the hidden divine plan.

Lastly, we are told that Joseph wakes up. This means more than he arises from physical sleep. It means he now perceives the divine dimension of what is happening. Mary's condition is not scandal but Spirit, and so he takes her into his home. He embraces the truth of what is occurring and unites himself to it. This is the path of all who follow Jesus – we need to think and pray about our interactions with others – especially those who are in any way in what our society considers ‘irregular’ situations – morally, legally, economically. Do we stick with law – or hide behind it to avoid difficulties -- or, as followers of Jesus, see if what is happening might in fact be the activity of God? (adapted from John Shea, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, p. 43-46)

My second of only 2 points – consider it an early Christmas present! So what? Christian imagination has never been satisfied with the Gospels. The stories are often theologically succinct – but if prayed over, discovered to be deeply, spiritually rich. This ‘righteous man’ was the one God handpicked to be a major voice in Jesus' formation. So here is a story of Joseph and Jesus working together in their carpenter shop. As Joseph teaches the ways of the hammer, the plane and the saw to the boy who “grows in wisdom, age, and grace” (Luke 2:52), he also confides in Him his life ‘learnings.’ As with all parents, Joseph talks too much. But the boy is an exceptional listener to his beloved papa Joseph. So Joseph speaks:

Remember, Jesus, whatever we're making, along with it we're always making a home for Spirit. Your mother thinks a home for Spirit is like an empty cup. But I favor a spacious room with a large window for sun....The best way to begin is to clear a space, and the best way to clear a space is to stop the mind from judging. Whenever things seem simple and obvious and the mind is feasting on its certainty and outrage, go slow. There is more than you think, only it hasn't appeared yet. Judgment stops the appearance of more. It cuts down people and situations to the little you know. It closes off possibilities.

Also when you do not judge, you often avoid disgracing another. The law is our measure. It is a tool of judgment, but someone always wields it. Do not use it as a hammer to hit or a saw to cut. Our tools are to fashion a table, not to brutalize the wood. The law is a tool to fashion a people of love, but it can break people and lose its sense of purpose. It always fears life will get out of control. So it wants to make examples of people who break it. It feeds and grows strong on transgression. It smacks its lips over scandal. But scandal is not the same as real offense. Scandal can be the intrusion of God's love that our feeble minds have yet to understand. So find a way to honor the law and honor the person who, in our limited understanding, has broken it. This is not easy – it requires a lot of hard soul work.

It requires making law work for love. Love is the sun; law its furthest and often weakest ray. If you hold onto love, you will see how the law can reflect it. If you lose love, law will not substitute for it. It will only be something you use to promote yourself and punish others. When you love the person through the law, you shape the law to the reality that is always more than you know. This gives life a chance to breathe and people a chance to change. And the deepest change will not be in other people, but in yourself. Love takes the beam out of your own eye. It does not focus on the splinters in the eyes of others.

Once something happened to me and I was tempted to judge and punish. But I held back and waited, and a deeper door opened – the door that is hard to find. I was led into a room of sun, a home for Spirit. Your mother and you were there – and a presence of light who talked to my fear. I sensed all distances had been crossed, all separations connected. It was a dream, but it was not sleep. The dream awakened me. It took the beam out of my eye. I saw that making a home for Spirit is an endless adventure – like watching you grow up, my son.

So see everything twice, Jesus. See it once with the physical eye and then see it again with the eye of the heart. At first glance, you often see an uneven and unusable piece of wood. You may be about to throw it away. But do not be fooled by surface appearances. Look deeper. On second glance, you may see a lovely arm of a chair hidden in its unaccustomed shape. When you see the loveliness, Jesus, embrace it. Take it into your home. Do not hesitate. Jesus, always be obedient to love. Always love.

And the boy listened.

So may we. Amen. (Shea, IBID, freely adapted, p. 46-48)