

Four brothers left home for college, and they became successful doctors and lawyers and prospered. Some years later, they chatted after having dinner together. They discussed the gifts that they were able to give to their elderly mother who lived far away in another city.

The first said, "I had a big house built for Mama."

The second said, "I had a \$100,000 theatre built into the house."

The third said, "I had my Mercedes dealer deliver her the latest and most luxurious car of their line."

The fourth said, "Listen to this. You know how Mama loved reading the Bible and you know she can't read it anymore because she can't see very well. I met this priest who told me about a parrot that can recite the entire Bible. It took 20 priests 12 years to teach him. I had to pledge to contribute \$100,000 a year for 20 years to the church, but it was worth it. Mama just has to name the chapter and verse and the parrot will recite it." The other brothers were impressed. After the holidays, Mama sent out her Thank You notes.

She wrote: "Milton, the house you built is so huge. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole house. Thanks anyway."

"Marvin, I am too old to travel. I stay home, I have my groceries delivered, so I never use the Mercedes. The thought was good. Thanks."

"Michael, you gave me an expensive theatre with Dolby surround sound, it could hold 50 people, but all my friends are dead, I've lost my hearing and I'm nearly blind. I'll never use it. Thank you for the gesture just the same."

"Dearest Melvin, you were the only son to have the good sense to give a little thought to your gift. The chicken was delicious. Thank you."

Three points of course! First, this is a day about food. But for those with faith, food is sacred. Someone wrote "Gelato is what heaven would taste like if someone froze it and crammed it into a paper cup." (Ian Morgan Cron) Food matters because it's one of the things that forces us to live in this world – this tactile, physical, messy, and beautiful world – no matter how hard we try to escape into our minds and our ideals. Food is a reminder of our common humanity, our fragility, our createdness. Try thinking ourselves through starvation. Try to command ourselves not to be hungry, using our own sheer will. It might work for a while, maybe, but at some point we'll find – no matter how high-minded or iron-willed – we will find ourselves face-to-face with our own hunger, and with that hunger, our own humanity.

The sacraments are all tangible, touchable ways to represent the intangible and untouchable, and this is most accessible in the Eucharist. The idea of a Savior, of a sacrifice of body and blood 2000 years ago, fills our senses and invades our present when our fingers break bread and our mouths fill with wine.

We don't experience this connection, this remembering, this intimate memory and celebration of Christ, only at the altar. We experience it, or at least we COULD, every time the bread and wine are present – essentially, every time we are at table. During His Last Supper, that last gathering of His disciples, Jesus commanded us to DO THIS – to gather around a table and remember, in church buildings and in our homes, during the sacrament of Communion and outside of it.

When we offer peace instead of division, when we offer faith instead of fear, when we offer someone a place at our table instead of keeping them out because they are different or messy or wrong somehow, we represent the heart of Christ.

When we feel that what we've done is too bad – that our sins and mistakes are beyond repair, and our faults and failures too deep and ugly, we need to take a chance and come back to the table – this Lord's table – and the table of our families and friends – and if when we are there we are treated with respect and esteem and kindness, then that voice of shame recedes, enough to let the deeper voice of truth, of hope, of Christ Himself, get planted a little deeper and deeper each time. The table becomes the hospital bed, the place of healing. It becomes the place of relearning and reeducating, the place where value and love are communicated.

When the table is full, heavy with platters, wine glasses scattered, napkins twisted and crumpled, forks askew, dessert plates scattered with crumbs and icing, candles burning low – it's in those moments when we feel a deep sense of God's presence and His delight in creating such creatures as ourselves. We feel honored to create such a place – here at the table of the Eucharist – and at our tables in our homes. We create a place for laughing and crying, for being seen and heard, for telling stories and creating memories.

Body of Christ. Blood of Christ. "Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus." Jesus says simply, "Remember me." Eucharist, Communion is connection, remembrance, gift. At church. At home. We give thanks for them both this day.

Second, family. I love watching people come into church on Sunday mornings. Especially families with little kids and teenagers. I'm always amazed that you are able to pull it off so well, so often, and make it look like there was NOT a huge fight with a defiant child in the car, a snarling teenager pouting about having to be here, an argument between spouses about the same old thing over and over. You don't let any of that show! And then, hopefully, slowly, the music, the word of God, a psalm that maybe touched some deep part of our soul, and we are once again, glad to be alive, and happy to be part of this sometimes grumpy little tribe called family. And a Catholic family at that.

Brian Doyle writes about his family getting to mass on Sunday mornings. "I find myself drifting back to the hour before Mass when I was a boy, in a large family, which featured many boys, but only one girl, which was an unfortunate state of affairs on Sunday morning, for my sister would claim the bathroom like a disputed territory long before dawn, and marinate in there for hours, apparently addressing each of her many long hairs by name, and cooing to it lovingly, and asking it gently about its emotional state and taking 8 or 9 baths and showers alternately, while snarling terrifying imprecations at her brothers, who hammered on the door so assiduously that our dad twice had to putty over the places where his sons had thrummed on the door, begging in the most polite and courteous tones for just one moment of ablution, shy murmured requests were denied with the most shocking and vulgar language, and this before we were to go to Mass and sit silently and ponder the Unimaginable Mercy at the root of all things, even our sister.

Occasionally we would try to beat our sister to the bathroom early, just to snatch the briefest of showers, even though she would vengefully run the kitchen tap in an effort to scald us out, but mostly we just lay abed until the last possible second, and then we dressed and thundered downstairs for shards of toast before being packed like herrings in a light olive oil into the car by our dad, who always wanted to strap our youngest brother atop the car for entertainment's sake, saying *What do we have ski racks for if not for strapping Tommy to the roof of the car?* Tommy was willing, I should say, and we were all willing, but our mother was not willing, and our sister never weighed in on this because she was STILL in the bathroom

applying her final mysterious unguents and potions. Every single time we ever went to Sunday Mass as a family my father would start the car, as the first signal to our sister that we were indeed leaving without her, and then he would turn the car around, as a second signal, and then he would bleat the horn, as a third signal, and then he would let the car inch forward slightly, which was the last straw, at which point our sister would come pelting out of the house like a fragrant harpy, trailing clouds of unguent and bad attitude.” (EIGHT WHOPPING LIES, p. 117-118)

So maybe your family doesn't do so badly after all! Today we give thanks for our families – whether we are with them or pandemically denied one another's presence – we are grateful that God gave us a shared DNA, shared experiences of growing up and learning how to love and forgive and be courteous and generous and kind. Today we thank God for our families. And whoever we sit with at this table – and our family table-- is part of our family. For we all belong to the family of God.

Third, and finally, gratitude on this day which is all about gratitude. I've been told by more than one person that this year giving thanks will be hard for them. For a myriad of reasons. This seemingly endless pandemic, the isolation and loneliness, loss of familiar and cherished routines, perhaps the loss of family members, the inability to gather with blood family (although some folks have also told me they are secretly rejoicing about that!), perhaps because we are mourning the loss of someone we love or anxious about job, money, health.

There's no doubt that this year it is more challenging to be 'feel' thankful than last. Robert Emmons suggests that even if we find it difficult to 'feel' grateful we still should take a stance of gratitude. That means that we have a fundamentally grateful outlook on life, an orientation that says that amidst the rancor and struggles of daily living, an underlying goodness exists in the universe and therefore 'I will be grateful in spite of the circumstances.' Emmons calls this 'defiant gratitude,' a term that speaks to the spirit of taking our feelings about a situation into our own hands instead of letting them control us. Emmons goes on to say that "The those who fail to feel gratitude cheat themselves out of their experience of life. And why would we want to cheat ourselves? Why would we want to become victims when we can empower ourselves to choose our own attitudes and thus emotional states? A very wise person once said, 'If there is any day in our life that is NOT Thanksgiving Day, then we are not fully alive.' Gratitude is simply too good to be left at the Thanksgiving table.

A story to conclude that I've found particularly helpful this Thanksgiving Day. Nancy Leigh DeMoss tells this story. Sandra was feeling exceedingly low as she made her way into the florist shop door. It was Thanksgiving week. This is the week she expected to deliver her second child, a son. But there was an automobile accident. As a result, she lost her baby. As if to add to her grief, her husband's company was threatening a transfer and her sister called to say she could not come for the holiday.

"Thanksgiving? Thankful for what?" she wondered aloud. "For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?"

"Good afternoon, can I help you?" The shop clerk's approach startled her.

"I....I need an arrangement," stammered Sandra. "For Thanksgiving."

"Are you looking for something that conveys 'gratitude' this Thanksgiving?" asked the shop clerk.

“Not exactly” Sandra suddenly blurted out. “In the last 5 months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.” Sandra immediately regretted her outburst, and was surprised when the shop clerk said, “I have the perfect arrangement for you.”

Just then another customer entered the shop. The clerk said, “Barbara...let me get your order.” She walked toward a small workroom, then quickly reappeared, carrying an arrangement of long stemmed thorny roses. Except the ends of the rose stems had been snipped....there were no roses, just stems with lots and lots of thorns.

“Want this in a box?” asked the clerk.

Was this a joke? Thought Sandra. Who would want rose stems with no flowers? But it was no joke. After the customer left with her order Sandra stammered, “Uhh, that lady just left with, uhh....she just left with no flowers!”

“Right,” said the clerk. “I cut off the flowers. That’s the Special....I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet.” Then the clerk explained, “Barbara came into the shop 3 years ago feeling very much like you feel today. She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she was facing major surgery.”

“That same year I had lost my husband,” continued the clerk, “and for the first time in my life, I had to spend the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel.”

“So what did you do?” asked Sandra.

“I learned to be thankful for the thorns,” answered the clerk quietly. “I’ve always thanked God for good things in life and never thought to ask Him why those good things happened to me, but when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time for me to learn that dark times are important. I always enjoyed the ‘flowers’ of life, but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God’s comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we’re afflicted, and from His consolation we learn to comfort others.”

Sandra said, ‘I guess the truth is I don’t want comfort. I’ve lost a baby and I’m angry with God.’

Just then someone else, a man named Phil, walked into the shop. He said his wife sent him to pick up their usual Thanksgiving arrangement.....12 thorny, long stemmed stems!

“Those are for your wife?” asked Sandra. “Do you mind me asking why she wants something that looks like that?”

“No.....I’m glad you asked,” Phil replied. “4 years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After 40 years, we were in a real mess, but with God’s grace and guidance, we slogged through problem after problem. He rescued our marriage. Jenny here (the clerk) told me she kept a vase of rose stems to remind her of what she learned from ‘thorny’ times, and that was good enough for me. I took home some of those stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific ‘problem’ and give thanks to God for what that problem taught us.”

As Phil paid the clerk, he said to Sandra, “I highly recommend the Special!”

"I don't know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life," Sandra said to the clerk. "It's all too....fresh."

"Well," the clerk replied carefully, "my experience has shown me that thorns make roses more precious. We treasure God's providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore so we might know His love. We shouldn't resent the thorns."

For the first time since the accident, she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take those 12 long stemmed thorns, please," she managed to choke out.

"I hoped you would," said the clerk gently. "I'll have them ready in a minute."

"Thank you. What do I owe you?" asked Sandra. "Nothing," said the clerk. "Nothing but a promise to allow God to heal your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me." The clerk smiled and handed a card to Sandra.

"I'll attach this card to your arrangement, but maybe you'd like to read it first." It read: "Dear God, I have never thanked you for my thorns. I have thanked you a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear; teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to you along the path of pain. Show me that, through my tears, the colors of your rainbow look much more brilliant." (C. King Duncan, Jr. (Editor) in DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Mar 2009, p. 66-68)

Rainbows follow storms. Healing will follow pandemic. Gratitude is simply too good to be left at the Thanksgiving Table. Let the Church say AMEN.