

Thanksgiving, Year C
Wednesday, November 23, 2022
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Texts referenced: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 100, Philippians 4:4-9, John 6:25-35

On this eve of Thanksgiving, I'm holding some seriousness as I've been pondering a question. What is thanksgiving to someone who grieves? In the past week, I met a person who lost a loved one, a profound and long-lived relationship. As I've thought about this person, I've wondered how I might expect such a person to give thanks after experiencing one of the greatest pains a person can. I've struggled with others who similarly have quite a bit that might stand in the way of giving thanks: a student has spoken to me of their mother facing the uphill battle of getting disability benefits, a friend has grieved her ability to find meaning in her life which she is now experiencing as stagnant, numerous people have spoken to me of struggling to find joy at all in their lives. Each spoke of some grief; be it grief for a lost loved one, lost security, lost meaning, lost passion, so again: what is thanksgiving to someone who grieves?

And what if thanksgiving doesn't need to be something happy, something joyful, something so overtly blissful? What would it mean to have that humor and joy AND for grief to also have a seat at the table? What would it look like to have all of ourselves in our thanksgiving?

What has helped me think about this question was a man I got to meet as a hospice chaplain. I got to work at a memory care unit for about six years and there I met a man named Sylvester as well as his wife Emma. Sylvester lived life incredibly joyfully, he wore a different colorful tie every day he went into his office for work and often wore one of those propeller hats, you know, the one that almost looks like a circus tent along with a propeller on top. Yet Sylvester found himself in that memory care facility in his mid-50s, bearing the consequences of early on-set Alzheimer's disease. His wife, Emma, would tell stories of how hard it had been leading to his being at that facility. She talked about how he, over time, became angry, and even violent to the point of lashing out at their daughter whom I also got to meet and who similarly spoke of that hardship. And of that loss. Yet often in the same conversations, they would speak to how good of a man Sylvester was, and how those pieces of his goodness persisted.

I was fortunate to see some of that reality even as he declined. He got to the point where he compulsively walked the halls at all hours, only sleeping for a few hours at a time, as he lost his ability to speak. Yet those pieces of him persisted. One time I met Sylvester and walked with him in the hall. At some point, I had gotten to know that he was something of an 80s metalhead, for which I was grateful because that's something I love as well. In hopes of connecting or at least honoring the passions of his life, I said, "Hey Sylvester, I heard you're a metalhead, you into Metallica, AC/DC? That's awesome" Sylvester stopped for a moment and began to mumble incoherently. I felt sad in that moment, seeing how this disease had so affected him. Yet as I held that grief and as he spoke, he eventually, went [air guitar with metal screech]. His disease may have robbed him of his speech, but it hadn't robbed him of his air guitar.

Those sorts of moments followed him throughout his final year, his wife always reporting on them to me. When his funeral eventually came to pass, his wife told the story of his last day to a packed room of people grieving the man they had known and loved. On that last day, we stood around Sylvester, offering end-of-life prayers. Eventually we came to be in silence. And in that profound moment so close to the man whose life was ending, to his family, and to God, Sylvester quite loudly passed gas and giggled. The funeral parlor erupted into laughter and as mourners paid their final respects, they went to the open casket laughing and with tears in their eyes.

I loved that family because they were a lesson to me in inviting all of a person to the table. They told stories of laughter and foolishness in the same breath as those of hurt and grief. Feelings of joy over the man they loved mingled with those of bitterness and grief over the way he declined. They've helped teach me that thanksgiving can include both joy and grief.

The loss I've heard articulated in the past week as well as the loss I witnessed in Sylvester's family I think must be welcomed in our thanksgiving, must be given a place at the table. And our faith speaks to this. Our Deuteronomy lesson tells of how God's people, welcoming all, alien, Levite, and all who reside are invited to sit and celebrate together AS THEY HOLD the traumas and violence and grief of slavery in Egypt and the effort of the Exodus. Jesus says in our gospel today and in the Gospel as a whole that he, that God, offers the bread of life freely to all, to those who celebrate and those who grieve.

Giving thanks does not mean we do so in spite of our losses and our hurts. We give thanks as we hold our griefs. We give thanks and give space for the hurt of our neighbors; those we love as well as those unknown and even alien to us.

On this, Mary Oliver wrote in one of her poems: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile, the world goes on. Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, over and over announcing your place in the family of things."

We share this family together; we celebrate and we hurt and God is grateful for each of us. So let us also give thanks for one another this evening as we worship and perhaps over a slice of pie after this service. Let us give thanks for one another and all of whom each of us are. Amen.