

A Stranger at the Table

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

In August of 2013 I went on a vacation that changed my life. It was a road trip out West with my then girlfriend now wife, Bonnie, and Bonnie's mother, and Bonnie's sister, and Maura, Catherine, and Niamh, Bonnie's cousins. I had never spent any significant time with any of Bonnie's relatives, and now I was about to spend 10 days in a minivan with her and five of her closest female relatives. The joke from the Mohan women was that if this vacation didn't scare me off, nothing would. I mean they laughed when they said it, so maybe it was a joke, but I knew this trip was also a test of sorts, and I was a little nervous. And so were they, and so was Bonnie. What would we discover about one another?

The road trip started in Yosemite National Park, and we did a lot of hiking. On the third day Bonnie and I hiked from the valley floor up to Glacier Point. We thought we'd have enough time and energy to hike

up and back down, but by the time we got up to the point, we knew it was probably going to be dark by the time we got back to camp, and we were tired and hungry. You can drive up to Glacier Point so we asked some normal looking people who looked like they might have room in their SUVs for us if they'd mind if we hitched a ride down with them, and they all practically fell over themselves trying to get away from us as fast as possible. So, we call down to Bonnie's family to drive up (which was a long ride) and get us. But while we were on the phone, some German tourists pulled over for us, with just enough room in their little rental car, and they said they heard we needed a ride, and they offered us a ride down the mountain. They were three wonderful guys and I really appreciated the ride. They were even going out of their way a little bit to get us back to our camp.

When we got back I insisted that our German heroes get out for a bit and join us. I appreciated their kindness and I wanted to offer them something, but it was our last day of camping, and I wasn't sure that we had much, I was also really tired. And this is the moment that I'll never forget from that trip. Bonnie's family treated our new German friends like hometown heroes. And we didn't have much in the way of food, but they offered them our last few cans of beer and we broke out the cooler full of snacks and feasted them as best we could. I didn't need to do anything but sit by the river with my new friends, and the beer and food and welcome was brought by the rest of the less tired family. I'll never forget it, because it was the first time I felt like Bonnie's family was MY family, and I was so, so grateful that I was a part of this family that knew how to show love and gratitude to strangers with whatever was at hand.

I was lying in my bedroll that night, trying to think about why it was that such a simple meal, such simple gratitude, moved me so much. Was it just because I'm a minister and a Christian and Jesus was someone who also valued meals and who sat and ate with strangers and served the table? That must have been a part of it, but there was something more. I let my mind wander, and I found myself thinking of Thanksgiving dinners as a kid.

I'm a big fan of Thanksgiving, in general. It is the greatest American holiday. It was invented by Abraham Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War. Lincoln saw Thanksgiving as an antidote to the forces that were tearing the country apart. How do we face the horrors and the grief of this war? With a meal, with our family, with Thanksgiving for the blessings we have received, and maybe that will help sustain a hope in our hearts that this national division that separates us from our neighbors is not permanent and may one day know peace again. Maybe Lincoln knew that a young, vibrant, changing democracy like the United States would always need a holiday like this. In some ways, on a national level, Thanksgiving is even better than Christmas, because EVERYBODY in our country celebrates it. North, south, east, and west, black white, and brown, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, atheist, republican, and democrat, expats gone for decades, and immigrants who have just arrived, we all celebrate Thanksgiving. In our reading from Deuteronomy, another source text and origin story for Thanksgiving, when you had your harvest feast of Thanksgiving, you made sure that even the aliens in your land were invited to celebrate too. NO ONE was supposed to be left out.

There is a deep spiritual truth here. If you are truly blessed, and if you are truly grateful for that blessing, you're going to have at least a little something for everyone. No one can be left out! Your Thanksgiving should be more than a private pious moment, it should be a celebration that benefits even the strangers you barely know yet.

I learned that as a kid at my family's Thanksgiving table. When we celebrated, the whole family got together, the food was always plentiful, and there was almost always somebody else at the table. For instance, my grandfather had a neighbor for many years. His wife and he never had children and had no close family. When his wife died, my mother started to invite him to Thanksgiving dinner. She wasn't particularly close to the man, she just knew he needed a place to be, and so she invited him, and he came and celebrated with us for many Thanksgiving meals. And he wasn't the only one. If we knew someone might need a place, they got an invitation.

And so that reason I was so deeply moved by my new family's hospitality to three foreign strangers who visited our camp was because of the lessons I had learned at my family's Thanksgiving table. This is how you prepare for the whole nation's holiest day. You stuff the turkey, you bake the pie, you have the whole family over, you hold hands together around the table and say grace and give thanks to God, AND don't forget to invite a stranger or anyone else who might need a place to sit.

And, of course, this is also my best vision for what a church should be—not a private prayer chapel, not a cavernous holy space where you can get lost in the alcoves. Those are wonderful things too, but church at its best is a community of people who have woven their lives together with gratitude and love and fellowship and faith in such a deep and meaningful way that when strangers and new friends pass through our community, there is something for them to grab a hold of, there may even be a safety net of love that can catch them and hold them in their time of need. This is my point. A church that knows the true meaning of Thanksgiving is not just a collection of individuals who feel grateful, it is a community that believes holiness is made complete when we invite a new friend to join us.