

**“MY THANKSGIVING TABLE”**  
**November 18, 2007**  
**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

It has been my tradition here to tell you all a story on Thanksgiving Sunday, so for the past few weeks I have been thinking, peering into the far chambers of my memory for one more notable year, one more moment that captured my imagination. But instead of moments, what I kept finding was faces, the faces of those—who for me in my life— have taught me whatever I know of thanksgiving and generosity; people who have lived from a posture of abundance and openness whom I have been privileged to know. So this morning what I would like to do for you is to set an imaginary Thanksgiving table and, at it, seat as guests a handful of those to whom I am most grateful for their contributions to my thanksgiving education.

So I invite you now to enter the dining room of my heart where the table is laid for eight. The candles are lit; the food is hot, fragrant, and abundant. Let me introduce to you my guests. At the head and foot of the table, I would seat my mother and my father. Now it's dicey to talk about my family with my mother sitting here in the congregation. The Oettingers were a family like most others: good at some things, not so good at others. Those who love them best would say about my parents' household that it was often disorganized and chaotic, and tidiness was never their strong suit. What they were, though, was hospitable to all and sundry, hospitable in a way I had to grow to adulthood to realize was unusual. At my father's memorial service, one of the speakers remarked that you could come to the Oettinger house for dinner, and end up staying three years. That actually happened once. It's just the way my parents were together. There could always be a place set for one or two more at the table, or a room found for a weary traveler or someone in transition. In high school, and college, my sisters' and my friends would come over at all hours of the day and night. It didn't matter if we were home, or if anyone were home. It was not unusual to walk in the front door that was never locked and find three buds who had helped themselves to a snack and were now watching TV or listening to music. And my parents reveled in it, or at least did a great job acting like they did. You had to be respectful and turn down the volume when others were sleeping, and the ethic was definitely one of self service; but family, extended family, friends, mere acquaintances, anyone who walked in the door was treated like this was their home. And whatever Leon and Happy had, they shared unhesitatingly and joyfully. No child could have grown up with better models of openness and generosity of spirit.

My next two guests are also from my childhood, an unlikely pair probably. One of my earliest childhood memories is of Sunday School—I'm pretty sure it was kindergarten—and the teacher was a woman named Mrs. Schlancer. Now Mrs. Schlancer was a person of great fascination to us children. She was tall and very thin, and had stark black hair, which I realize now had to have been dyed. Her voice was low and gravelly, and she always wore dark red lipstick which pooled in the wrinkles around her lips. She was a chain smoker, and yes, she smoked cigarettes while teaching Sunday school class to kindergarteners—this was the 1950s. Hard to imagine today. The lesson this particular morning was King David dancing before the Lord in joy and celebration. Probably fifteen or twenty of us small children sat completely enthralled as Mrs. Schlancer told the story of King David bringing the ark of the

covenant into Jerusalem dancing at the head of the parade, accompanied by the sounds of cymbals and castanets, harps and tambourines. And then, wonder of wonders, Mrs. Schlancer passed out among us castanets and tambourines and small finger cymbals and I think a triangle or two; and she, cigarette in one hand, tambourine in the other, invited us to have our own joyful dancing parade.

Now I have to tell you, in our well-mannered Episcopalian world, Sunday school teachers did not dance, and children were expected to sit quietly and yes, even reverently at church and church school, so this was a startling event. But we were young enough and astonished enough that we just fell in and responded with abandon. Down the corridor of the church school wing and back again we went, prancing and twirling and attacking our instruments with robust glee. and then a few large circles around the classroom. It was probably the first true religious experience of my life, my arms outstretched, finger cymbals alive on my fingers, dancing unselfconsciously for joy because I was God's and God was mine, and King David had done it long ago in the Bible so it must be ok. And it was very good. So Mrs. Schlancer and King David both merit a seat at my Thanksgiving table.

And opposite them I would put a couple named Jim and Ellen. I performed the wedding of Ellen and Jim when I was a young pastor in Duluth. I would have said of them then that they were young, good looking, deeper of pocket than of substance. Their engagement was 18 months so that their wedding could be perfectly and exactly planned, like the future course of their lives and careers. But two years later, Ellen was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, and had to undergo a bone marrow transplant. It was early days of that technology, and this transplant did not go well. It was clear that Ellen was dying. She was bald; her face swollen almost to the point of unrecognition by disease and medication; her once elegant body wasted, fragile beneath the bed sheets. Once a week I would drive to Minneapolis to visit them in the hospital. Every week, I would greet them and ask how they were doing. Every week, Jim would answer, "It's one more day with my beautiful girl, so how could it not be wonderful." They were the first couple I was privileged to know who, in the face of catastrophic illness and the shadow of death, had richly found new life, a deep and focused joy in the frail present, the ability to live purely moment to moment, thankful just for life and breath, for one more day to see, and hear, and touch. These two, so young, so steadfastly loving: the depth of their will for good moves me still. Whatever my visits gave to them was nothing compared to what their example taught me, and my Thanksgiving table would be incomplete without them.

My final guest at this Thanksgiving of the heart would be a seventeen year old girl named Dulcie, born with Downs' Syndrome. I met Dulcie when my youth group was invited to work as judges and helpers at a Special Olympics training event. One of her teachers was there, and happened to mention to me that Dulcie was working on reading and could use a friend to read with her an afternoon a week, much like the SMART program here. Ed, the teacher, was one of those who had the look; you know the look. He'd tell you about a need, and while in so many ways you wanted to say "no," he'd turn that look on you, and "yes" would come out of your mouth. So, with no little trepidation, I said "yes" to Ed, completed the training, and became Dulcie's Friday friend. Dulcie was the first and only developmentally challenged person I have known in any depth. My time with her was alternately inspiring and frustrating, difficult and rewarding, sometimes all in one afternoon. But what struck me most in knowing her over the year I read with her was that it was the gift of her condition that she experienced the world

unambiguously. She would be uncertain when faced with the unexpected, or when she was treated less than well in a world that did not fully embrace her; but she did not suffer the partialness of spirit that afflicts most of us. The world for her was black and white, no getting lost in shades of gray. Her joy, her thankfulness, her generosity when they came, and they came often, they were complete in a way I could only admire and even envy. Her laugh, her smiles, her quick affections, they were on one plane too large, too loud, too bright; but they also held an utter transparency that could be transcendent, pure in a way that evoked the sacred. I could do many things that Dulcie could not, but Dulcie could simply “be” in ways impossible for me; and knowing her revised everything I would ever again think or feel about ability and disability, brokenness and wholeness. Any Thanksgiving table would be blessed by the purity of Dulcie’s enjoyment.

So there they are, my Thanksgiving guests, a table full of those to whom and for whom I will always be profoundly grateful. We take our seats; we clasp hands and bow our heads. Thank you God. Thank you God. Thank you God. Amen.