

“THE BEST THANKSGIVING”
Proverbs 3:19-24, 27-30, 35; Revelation 21:1-5
November 20, 2011
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Throughout the decade of the 1970s, I was a Thanksgiving orphan. I lived on the East Coast, my family was in the Los Angeles area, and plane tickets were just too expensive to go home. So every year, I sat at someone else’s table.

One year, when I was living in New York City, my roommate invited me to Thanksgiving dinner with her family outside of Provincetown, Massachusetts, the very tip of Cape Cod. We drove up early Thursday morning, and arrived to a house in chaos—my roommate Cathy had 5 brothers, some of whom were married with children. There was a football game playing at high volume in the family room, and men—and a few women—huddled together over every possible horizontal surface, their running commentary punctuated with whoops of delight and an occasional boo at the ref. Kids ran between there and the kitchen where the women—and a few good men—were preparing a feast. Cathy and I were immediately assigned table setting duty, and off we went. Cathy had warned me that her mother was particular: forks, knives and spoons had to be lined up exactly one inch from the table’s edge; napkins folded just so. The good crystal had to be wiped before being placed on the table, and salt and pepper shakers placed with military precision at regular intervals down a table to be set for 20. Having learned my table setting skills under the eye of an equally we’ll say “discerning” mother, I was up for the job. We did good work, Cathy and I, although I found myself puzzled that once the table was finished, Cathy disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a candy bar. I don’t remember any more what variety, but it was a run of the mill candy bar. She set it carefully to the left of the napkin at her father’s place at the head of the table. I didn’t think much about it as, our job complete, we became absorbed into the cheerful movement of the day.

Cathy’s mother Anna had the gift of timing. I remember when she invited me, she told me dinner would be at 4:00, and I would swear to this day that the grandfather clock in the hall had just bonged four times when we sat down, and everyone clasped hands around the table and named three things for which they were thankful, and a wish for the future. Then we ate.

It was loud; there was a lot of laughing and story telling. It was surprisingly comfortable for me who knew only one person at the table, and she seated far, far away. After the main course, we took a break. The hardy—or fool-hardy—among us took a walk along the beach in the bitter cold and wind of late November on the Cape. Some went back to football. Anna Griffin and two daughters-in-law readied the dessert: three different varieties of pie. When, a good hour later, we reconvened at the table, there was pie at every place except for Cathy’s father Sam’s. As we all dug into our pumpkin, apple, or peach, he slowly unwrapped the candy bar and more slowly still, with eyes closed, ate it bite by bite, all the time holding the hand of the daughter-in-law to his right.

I must have looked puzzled, because someone at the table, in a voice part appreciation, part resignation, ordered, “Ok, Dad, tell the story.”

And this was the story he told. He had been a Marine in World War II, deployed in the Pacific theater. In 1943, he and his unit had been part of the assault on the island of Tarawa, one of the bloodiest battles of the War. He and two other men were part of the force left behind after the official end of the battle. They were engaged in clearing the island. As they worked, the sentry spotted a group of Japanese soldiers headed towards them. It was unexpected; they were far outnumbered and unprepared. They rushed to hide. Mr. Gifford climbed a tree. Yards away, the Japanese force stopped for the night. Therefore, all night long, this young Marine remained stretched out along a thick tree branch silent, unmoving, afraid every moment that he would somehow be discovered. Morning came, and the Japanese moved on. The Marines came out from their hiding places, exhausted as much from fear as from fatigue. One of them realized it was Thanksgiving day. Another produced a single candy bar from his pocket and the three men solemnly shared. "I have never been more grateful in my life," Sam told me. "This terrible battle, so many casualties on both sides. Then our long night of terror. Yet here we were: whole, safe, eating chocolate. I vowed there and then that I would never take the gifts of my life for granted again, and every Thanksgiving I renew that pledge. And now," he said, raising his daughter-in-law's hand, "I have this joy that I could never have imagined then." His Japanese daughter-in-law Yuriko kissed his cheek. "Nor my father either," she replied. And four months later, her first child was born, and named for both of his grandfathers.

At this point in my life, a lot of my Thanksgiving days blur together in a jumbled and quietly satisfying composite. But that year in Provincetown, it will always stand out for me. I was either 23 or 24 at the time, older than Sam Griffin had been when in the aftermath of a horrific battle, he stood with two other men eating a candy bar—the best Thanksgiving of his life. I realized that day, I think for the first time, how privileged my life had been, and how arrogantly naive. I, a classic liberal child of the Vietnam era, with my distanced disdain for all things military. I had never seriously considered what it meant to be a soldier, to fight an enemy, to see first hand the atrocities of war, and then make the choice of what those experiences made of you. Sam Griffin was able to make of his experiences gratitude, openness, and love for his daughter-in-law, the child of his former enemy.

I learned that day that thanksgiving, the spiritual posture of gratitude, is not the obvious conclusion to the experience of life, but a true choosing, a decision about who you will be and how you will strive to live your life, whatever that life hands out to you. Up until that year, I had always loved Thanksgiving. Sam Griffin taught me to respect it. So maybe it was the best Thanksgiving of my life. Thanks be to God. Really. Amen.