

Earlier in the year, Bishop Spalding called the deacons of the diocese together so he could discuss several things with us. During the course of his discussion, he mentioned that the Church is like a family gathered for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. When families gather together, everyone gathers around the table. The ones we agree with and the ones we don't; the quiet and the loud; the endearing and the difficult. They're all there sharing a meal. It's the same with the Church, he said. And we're stronger for the fact that everyone is there.

As Thanksgiving approached, I found myself dusting off my own "book of memory," to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare,¹ to revisit once again some of my own Thanksgiving dinners when I was growing up as well as other family events.

My dad had two brothers whose families lived near ours in the Washington, D.C. area; my mom had a sister whose family lived in northern California, Sacramento to be exact.

I thought about them all. I won't bore you with the whole company of them; I'll just mention a few to give you a flavor of my "book of memory's" general plot.

Our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners rotated among my parents and aunts and uncles who lived in the D.C. area. Whenever the whole family gathered, my cousin Carolyn, nine years older than me, would usually be there. She was a person of strong opinions and an equally strong personality. She went on to become surely one of the first female police officers on active patrol in Washington, D.C., a rarity in those days. It was an experience that didn't exactly improve her opinion of human nature.

Her sister, my cousin Virginia, or "Ginny" as we called her, was my age, almost to the day. I always found her to be somewhat mysterious. She had pitch-dark hair and eyes, was always congenial, if a bit on the quiet side, and frequently bore a sly smile that made me think she knew things, secrets of the universe, that none of the rest of us did.

There was my cousin Andy, Carolyn's age, who was very outgoing, often in a mischievous way. He too went on to become a police officer and eventually became a

¹ William Shakespeare, "Henry VI Part One," *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works, 2nd Ed. Kindle Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), II.4.

homicide detective. I remember him telling me once about his first murder case, a case that involved a man who'd been killed in a fight outside a bar. When he arrived at the scene, he asked one of the patrol officers present if there'd been any witnesses. "Yeah," he answered. "That guy over there says he saw the whole thing." My cousin Andy asked the man if he could give him a description of the person who'd committed the murder, whereupon the witness gave him a very puzzled look and said, "Well, yeah, I can. But after he killed the guy, he went back in the bar to finish his beer and have another one. He's in there sitting at the bar right now." "We're not dealing here with PhD candidates," my cousin told me.

On my mom's side of the family, there was my uncle Oscar, married to my mom's sister, my Aunt Margaret, with whom we got together less often given that we lived on opposite sides of the country. Uncle Oscar was both very extraverted and very wealthy. He used to drive a Cadillac that was approximately the size of a small cruise ship.

One time the summer before I entered high school my parents and I were to meet Uncle Oscar, Aunt Margaret, and their daughter, my cousin Debbie, in Kentucky for an extended family visit with my grandparents who lived in a small town not too far over the Kentucky line from Tennessee.

One day while we there, my grandad wanted to take a ride around the countryside, so he, my dad, me, and Uncle Oscar piled into the car, my grandad's prized Chevy Bel Air, and took off to inspect the places my grandad used to farm in his early years, the barns he'd helped build, the church where his father had been a Baptist preacher — which had no indoor plumbing even then in 1970, by the way; and you think we have bathroom issues — and other notable sights from his past. Uncle Oscar was driving and doing his best to decipher my grandad's sometimes cryptic directions — "Turn down yonder," for example — when my grandad turned to him not long into the drive and said, "Oscar, do you hear that? That strange noise? Sounds like a cat." Uncle Oscar just laughed and said, "Zeb" — my grandad's name was Zebedee, but everyone called him "Zeb" — "it's just the engine."

My grandad asked the same question several times during what turned out to be about a ninety mile roundtrip and received the same answer. The rest of us sometimes thought we could hear something too, though it may only have been the power of suggestion.

When we got back, my grandad — always a curious man — popped the hood open to see if he could figure out what had made the curious noise. Lo and behold, out popped his pet cat, a bit greasy from his having secured a seat for the trip somewhere in the engine block, but otherwise as fit as he could be. He hopped down to the driveway, shook himself, and sauntered into the house with all the nonchalance for which cats are justly famous.

The highlight of that particular trip, though, wasn't the cat. The plan was for me to drive back to California and spend a couple of weeks there with Uncle Oscar, Aunt Margaret, and my cousin Debbie, who was a year older than me and of whom I was quite fond. She was blond-haired, blue-eyed, graceful, an equestrian — what's not to like? — and when back in those days Mike Love and the Beach Boys sang in "California Girls"

*I've been all around this great big world
And I've seen all kinds of girls
Yeah, but I couldn't wait to get back in the States
Back to the cutest girls in the world.*

I wish they all could be California girls.²

I was pretty sure they'd run into my cousin Debbie somewhere along the line.

I was excited about seeing California for the first time — the land of milk and honey — but I was also excited about the prospect of spending a couple of weeks with my cousin. Here was the thing, though. Ever since I was a small child I suffered from terrible car sickness, something that lasted into my teenaged years. Even the thought of driving an extended distance would make me sick even before the car traveled its first quarter-mile. The prospect of my making it all the way from Kentucky to California without incident seemed grim.

I found out later that this had been the subject of extended discussions between my mom and my Aunt Margaret, who was a nurse. Years later, they told me that Aunt Margaret had packed enough medical supplies in the capacious trunk of my Uncle's Cadillac to enable

² Brian Douglas Wilson, Mike E. Love, "California Girls".

her to respond to any conceivable downturn in my health along the way. Apparently she was well-stocked enough that she could have ordered my Uncle Oscar to pull off into a Stuckey's parking lot so she could perform emergency surgery if the need arose.

While their pre-planning was only prudent, they'd failed to take into consideration my fear of being acutely embarrassed. By sheer force of will, I compelled myself to uphold the credo that there was no way — no way — I'd humiliate myself by getting sick sitting right next to Debbie. And I didn't. When we finally arrived in Sacramento, the rest of my traveling companions emerged tired and bedraggled from the car. But I had a spring in my step and was feeling quite chipper. Not only that. I never again got car sick, a miraculous cure for which I can thank cousin Debbie.

I mention all this not to bore you with my families idiosyncrasies — or my own, it not having occurred to me until much later in life that I must have appeared as odd to the rest of my family as they did to me much of the time — but as an illustration of Bishop Spalding's point. The Church, for all of our individual foibles and oddities, is stronger than any one of us, or any few us, could be, and we individually are the stronger for everyone being at the table. The same is true of families, or at least it was certainly true of mine, and as today's Thanksgiving holiday commemorates, the same is broadly true of the country.

We've all grown up with Thanksgiving Day, but it wasn't always so. In fact, as history goes, it's a fairly recent observance, and its origin has much to teach us today about an important part of its significance.

In the Fall of 1863, the 2,400 residents of the little town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania were still trying to sort through the devastation wrought when 160,000 soldiers commenced what was then and remains the largest battle ever fought on the North American continent just two months earlier. Homes and farms were lying in ruins, and barns, shops and parlors were still stained with the blood spilled during countless battlefield amputations. Fifty thousand souls had lost their lives in and around their quiet hamlet or were wounded or missing. Men and women from all over the country wandered the ruined streets and fields hoping against hope to

find some word of their loved one's fate. Lists of the dead were still being assembled, and as a local paper, *The Gettysburg Compiler* sadly observed, "Every name is a lightening stroke to some heart, and breaks like thunder over some home, and falls [like] a long black shadow across some hearthstone."³

And yet ...

And yet, in October of 1863 Abraham Lincoln chanced upon a letter written to him by Sarah Hale, a 74-year-old magazine editor. Mrs. Hale suggested that the President declare a day of national thanksgiving, for, as she said, it's always good to remember our blessings. She'd made the same request before of other presidents, but they'd ignored her.⁴ This time, though, even in the midst of the unprecedented calamity then engulfing the nation, Lincoln thought it a good idea, so certain was he, like the prophet Isaiah before him,⁵ that, come what may, the Lord's providence and blessings are the source of our salvation in every affliction.

"The year that is drawing towards its close," Lincoln proclaimed, "has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies ... [T]hese bounties ..., which are of so extraordinary a nature, ... cannot fail to penetrate and soften ... the heart."⁶ We're living in difficult times, he acknowledged; nonetheless, we must be mindful of the blessings we continue to enjoy. He went on to write:

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds

³ Quoted in Brian Mockenhaupt, "The Battle of Gettysburg: A Time When American Civilians Saw War Firsthand," *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/07/the-battle-of-gettysburg-a-time-when-american-civilians-saw-war-firsthand/277499/2/>.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation of Thanksgiving," Abraham Lincoln Online. www.abrahamlincolnonline.org, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/thanks.htm>.

⁵ Isa 63:7-9 (NAB)

⁶ *Ibid.*

*of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.*⁷

Lincoln's expression of thanksgiving, the very same celebration we mark today, was rooted in his certainty that the great trial the nation was enduring would make us better than we'd been before, and that somehow, in His own way, the Author of our liberty would ensure that new life would rise from our suffering, and our tears would in some unforeseeable way be made holy. It was a certainty to which he would return in his address at the dedication of the new national cemetery at Gettysburg just six weeks later, confident that with the war's end and the unity of our peoples restored, we would again live out the truth of the national motto *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of Many, One", one people stronger than any segment of it could be.

What is true of the Church, families, and nations is true also of individuals.

Whether this be for you "a time to weep [or] a time to laugh, a time to mourn [or] a time to dance ... a time to embrace [or] a time to be far from embraces, a time to seek [or] a time to lose, a time to keep [or] a time to cast away, a time to rend [or] a time to sew,"⁸ may it be a time of thanksgiving, for in thanksgiving all things are in time made new, and all things in time will be made holy.

Happy Thanksgiving, brothers and sisters.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ecc 3:2-7 (NAB)