

Up and Down and Down and Up

The Reverend Peter Cook
First Congregational Church of Burlington
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Based on Genesis 37 to 45

Thanksgiving is truly my favorite holiday. It offers me a chance to be with my family before our culture's Christmas machine ramps up. Thanksgiving stands in such contrast to the guy who has already set up a tent outside a Best Buy so he will be first in line for one of ten deep discount television sets. His tent is equipped with its own microwave, a television and a game console and a small refrigerator for his beer. I wonder how his Thanksgiving is going to work out. Will he lose his place in line or will he try to make his tent hospitable to friends and family on Thanksgiving Day?

Thanksgiving is not about getting the best deal on TV sets or being first in line. Our real joy is found in welcome, generosity, and kindness in space which feels physically and spiritually hospitable. The best Thanksgiving meals I have been to are the ones where everyone can contribute something and be a gracious host. Dad may make the turkey and the stuffing, but Uncle John brings the cranberry sauce. Aunt Sarah brings the apple and pumpkin pies, and Helen always brings her famous creamed onions.

I remember one Thanksgiving, where a distant Jewish relative, Rosemary came to dinner. In her 80's, Rosemary was pleasantly plump and proudly brought to the Thanksgiving meal her special dietetic hard sauce for the plum pudding—which as far as I could tell was so crammed full of sugar and fattening butter that you could have a coronary right there at the table. We all laughed and enjoyed it just the same. But Thanksgiving is not just about the food. It's about how we open the door when our guests come bringing their gifts. It's about showing people the best place to sit. It's about our graciousness when we serve one another and listen. And if your house is in a crowded neighborhood, you as the host might empty out your drive way so that Grandma Mary can park close to the house and not have to walk too far with her walker. Thanksgiving is a time when we act our best. I like to think of Sunday morning as our church putting on a Thanksgiving supper at its best every Sunday. We delight in other people and their stories. As Christians, our focus is on welcoming and including others.

So today I want to offer you my fellow church family members, a Thanksgiving challenge. I challenge us as a church family to really step up and put on the best welcome we know how. Each of us has something we can do and bring to our worship of God. Let's start small. We need people to help put out the coffee and cut the bagels. We need others to open the door and offer a warm greeting. We also need ushers who can prepare our family space for worship and make lot of things go smoothly. We need people to bring their best cranberry sauce to our dinner here so to speak and bake muffins, bring fruit, contribute money to make our fellowship times and meals more fun. And when people come here we want to make it a little easier for those who have more trouble getting around or visiting for the first time to find a place in our parking lot. The more

able-bodied among us can park down the street to make room.

It's just so much more fun and spiritually nourishing when we can all contribute and make a little sacrifice to help us live into our promise. So today, let's go for it and sign up. We need fourth graders, fourteen year olds, people who are forty something or those who are 84 to participate. Each of us has a gift to offer and we need to pitch in. We need to offer a place of welcome where we greet others as if they are all Christ himself. Let's get together and do this as we look for other opportunities to offer our welcome. Please sign up in fellowship hour or send us a note. We want to make good use of what everyone here has to offer. We each have a gift of kindness to give to enrich our common life.

But Thanksgiving meals can also be a little tough, even with these niceties. Remember that story of Joseph and his brothers--the ultimate dysfunctional family. You know the story right? Joseph was the smart kid who came home after his first semester at Harvard talked about himself all through dinner as his father beamed on. All the while, his brothers who stayed home had to sit there and choke on their turkey as their Dad paid homage to his Ivy League educated son. Nauseating. Surely, some of those brothers wanted to sell that brother, dressed in his Technicolor Harvard sweatshirt, to the Pharaoh.

Imagine then, that the father's daughter, Holly, comes home from graduate school with her friend Georgette. During dinner, Holly movingly lifts her glass for a toast and proudly announces that she is getting married to Georgette. Her parents beam with pride that Holly finally found the love of her life. Unfortunately, Uncle Joe sneers and sarcastically mutters under his breath about how same sex marriage will "end American civilization as we know it." And in an instant, Holly and Georgette move from feeling loved and supported to feeling diminished.

Some of the Holly's and Georgettes of the world, after getting married endure much worse than Uncle Joe's mumbling and feel like Joseph banished to Pharaoh's exile. They feel they could never come home for Thanksgiving again. They might do ok in exile or even do quite well. However, many still long for home.

The church, I am sad to say, is all too familiar with the hurt, banishment and exclusion in present the Joseph story. We have become agents for sin rather than good as we wrap ourselves in a cloak of Joseph's righteousness and let the jealousy and revenge of Joseph's brothers work on our hearts. We glorify certain kinds of people over others. We put down others who don't measure up to our elitist standards. Some are effectively sent to an emotional or physical exile. We speak of love and the need for humans to have companionship, but then prevent our pastors from marrying two men or two women who seek to make a covenantal commitment to one another.

This week we saw a big family dinner party, in the body of Christ, take a bad turn for the worse. On Wednesday, we learned that Reverend Frank Schaeffer, who out of love for his son, married his son to another man. Reverend Schaeffer was told by the United Methodist Church that they would defrock him in the next 30 days, if he could not reconcile his new calling to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community with

the laws from the church's Book of Discipline.

The action of the United Methodist church is a sin against God and neighbor. It's a sin, because it runs contrary to the Gospel, Christ's compassion and God's love yearning for all her children that they may love and be loved. At First Congregational Church we take risks for the Gospel. That's what churches do. In 2000, the day after civil unions were legalized in Vermont, Holly Putterbaugh and Lois Farnham, had a civil union in this sanctuary. That ceremony was performed by Reverend Adrienne Carr and Reverend Bob Lee. With the blessing of the Deacons, Holly and Lois made a decision to be true to one another and love well, with Bob's and Adrienne's help and the encouragement of this congregation, required great courage. This church struggled well to put faith into action. It should also be noted that Governor Howard Dean, who is member of this church, also was courageous in campaigning for and signing civil unions in to law. I don't mean to suggest that our church was a picture of perfection. The Thanksgiving family supper at church was not entirely harmonious. There were perhaps a few Uncle Joe's who really struggled that the church performed civil unions. It's possible that some among us still feel some of that ambivalence in our own hearts. But even amidst our differences and our brokenness, let us say that the church offered the care and generosity of spirit, which was required in that moment. We acted on the Gospel of Jesus' love, which we all proclaim and hold dear.

I cannot explain to you how much joy it brings to me that I can say an emphatic yes to two men or two women who want to make commitment to be true to one person and marry. I truly give thanks I can be in a church where Adrienne and I don't have to worry and you don't either. I also give thanks that civil unions and marriages are so much more a reality in our churches than they were 13 years ago.

But let us be clear, like Joseph, many are still living in pharaoh's exile. In some parts of the world you could be put in jail for being gay. And in America it's tough too. It's going to be a tough Thanksgiving for Reverend Frank Schaefer who now lives in an ecclesiastical hell for acting on his conscience. This Thanksgiving he faces the possibility of being forced to choose his faith, his love for his son and his son's husband, along with his vow to marry and care for other gay and lesbian people over the church he has served and loved his whole life. There are people who truly feel banished by their biological and churches families for whatever reason. There are people out there who want to come home for Thanksgiving, but won't get the invitation to come home. Like Joseph they may have created a new life in their exile and, in some cases, have done well. But it is still not home. As people of faith, however, we are invited to imagine the possibilities for hope and redemption out of tragedy. We seek to help people find a home in the heart of God.

In a twist, Joseph, offered care to his demoralized but shame-based brothers who wandered into Pharaoh's kingdom because they were starving. Joseph being human, thought of revenge, and indeed sought to discredit one of his brothers by planting stolen goods on him. But in the end, the brothers asked Joseph for mercy and were welcomed to share in Joseph's bounty in their exile. Joseph changed his heart, as did his brothers, and they were saved from starvation and destruction. As Christians, we struggle for justice and to be faithful. We have had great triumphs. We have done and will continue to do

acts of great courage, love and justice. The church amazes me by its goodness. But we are often frail; we can fail so miserably at our mission. Ours is also a story of betrayal, sin, jealousy, brokenness and astoundingly bad judgment. Yet amidst the ups and downs, the triumphs and the tragedies of this life, we live with the promise that God is always there. Reconciliation and forgiveness are always possibilities. And I mean always. Through Jesus' resurrection we remember that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

So as a resurrection community of hope, may we be a place that extends a very warm welcome where we take pride in our ministry. But let us never boast of perfection as Joseph once did. Nor should the jealousy of Joseph's brothers in our own hearts get the best of us. Instead, let us live with the awareness that amidst the ups and downs of this life that God is with us and is working on our hearts. May we live into the truth that we are broken yet a forgiven, and forgiving, community committed to welcoming the whole world to the Thanksgiving table of justice and love.

Unfortunately the church can look more like that dumb tent in the Best Buy parking lot metaphorically speaking. People feel unwelcome because they enter a weird space where the faithful are so worried about being first in line for Jesus and his benefits. At church, we meet unctuous Christians clamoring to get to heaven where they can be assured that they can watch the big screen TV in the sky after they die. As we cloister ourselves in our pietistic tents, we become impatient with people who seem different to us or ask something of us. But the church needs to get out of the parking lot and its theological pup tent, and create a big, open, hospitable space which offers a very bold welcome. Amen.