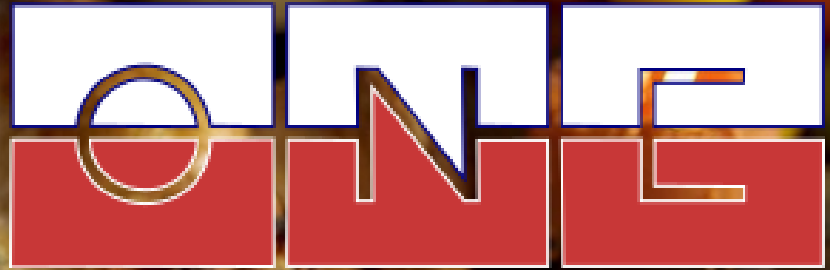


INSIDE:

+ Defining family and family Thanksgiving



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Ellis County Ministerial Alliance

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Editor's Note:

This month we asked our writers "who/what" family is to them and what it looks like to have a "family Thanksgiving."

The Definition of Family

Written by:
Ben Houchen

Family is such a loaded word. For many, it is a joyous word, something to be celebrated and upheld. For others it is something to fear. Abuse, hate, and disowning are all they've known. For still others, family is just an idea. Nothing that was ever abusive, but nothing that was ever important either.

The meaning of family fills so many people in so many different ways. I work with people who are all over the map on these meanings. What I've found is that while I'm convinced we all need family, blood relatives are not the only way to have it. We must grow to understand that

family must be a group or even just a person that we choose to bring in as family. And unfortunately, sometimes it means setting strong boundaries with the families we are born into.

Some might say that is just friendship. Family is different from friendship because with family you can be genuinely you around them, regardless of situation or mood. It is people you don't have to thank for passing the salt, because they know you are grateful. It is people who care for you enough to help without asking, to know your needs, to share your pain and your joy without having to fix or correct. And yes, I know, even the best family doesn't do this all the time.

But it is the goal we ought to aspire to.

Maybe you'd say, "Ben, I already have friends like that in my life. Why would I need to do something more to create another family?" You don't! Instead, you may need to simply look around and realize that some of the people you call friend are really family. And if you say, "Ben, I've never had a relationship like that in my life." I'd say, "I'm so sorry. Because you deserve to have family...good family. We all do."

And I'd tell you that as painful and difficult as it might be, please keep trying to find that family. Find people you can trust, even a little. Work on those

The Definition of Family (Continued)

relationships and if you can be vulnerable, even in small ways with people (and not everyone can, so this isn't for all). See how they respond to you. Seek out places and people who are giving back to the community. Find opportunities to volunteer.

So many families are made in service. Maybe

because the nature of family is service. It's service to the family for the good of each individual. It's the combination of individual and communal growth. It's love, manifested in relationships - or at least it should be, it can be, it really needs to be. Our old ideas of family weren't wrong, they were just

incomplete. It's time to take up the mantle of family and build a house around it. Build a home where we all can find the love and hope of family within.



Ben Houchen is the Administrator of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Hays

Thanksgiving: A Time for Caring

Written by:
Macey Pfeifer

Family, to me, is anyone that makes your life better. They don't have to be a blood relation. They are people that are there for you when it counts: no strings attached, no stipulations, no ultimatums. I, for one, am so lucky in the family department. I have two very involved parents, a sister, a brother-in-law, a niece, and two nephews. I'd say my family is pretty close. We message daily, we see each other multiple times a week, and we try and do family dinner every Sunday evening! We come to one another's activities

and join together for all the kids' sporting events.

I'd say a lot of families aren't like this.

I know a lot of my friends tell me, "I wish my family were as close as yours," or "I wish my siblings supported my kids like you do for your sister's." It's just instinct for me. I missed out on a lot of family activities and sporting events for quite some time when I had a job that required me to be busy in the evenings. It made it so hard to connect with the ones I loved most. Now that I have a job that is more of the "norm" and my evenings are free, I have so

much time to spend with family and friends. It has been a complete dynamic change for me.

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite times of the year. I love that we get to gather and just be thankful for each other's time and presence. There are no gifts, no baskets of eggs, no explosives, etc. It is just time together and delicious food. On Thanksgiving, I personally have always celebrated two meals on that day. For the lunch meal, I attend with my mom's side of the family. The lunch includes her parents, her siblings and their spouses, her uncle, and, of course, my

Thanksgiving: A Time for Caring (Continued)

immediate family. For the dinner meal, we celebrate with my dad's side of the family. His dad, his siblings and their spouses, their children, and again, my immediate family are present. My favorite Thanksgiving food is mashed potatoes and gravy. Fun fact: I didn't start eating mashed potatoes until I was about 15. I always thought it looked a little weird!

A family Thanksgiving to me, is just being gathered with those who love and care for each other. For me, that is actual blood relations. I know, though, that a lot of people gather with friends

as opposed to family. Maybe they have no living relatives, or maybe they do not get along with their family members. Whatever the case may be, the holiday isn't meant to single out people who have no "family." It's about inclusivity and showing one another that they have people to lean on.

You see it in movies a lot, someone that is singled out a lot or lonely and they end up getting invited to a family dinner. You see it also in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." It wasn't that the Grinch hated Christmas... it was that he envied others for their togetherness. His heart

grew three sizes that day once Cindy Lou Who invited him to her family meal. She showed him compassion even after he stole all the materialistic items that come along with the holiday of Christmas. It's not about how many people surround you or if they are related to you. It's about being with those who care and those who make your life better with them in it.



Macey Pfeifer is the Executive Director of First Call for Help.

Give, in Thanks, to Others

Written by:
Cheryl Glassman

As we move closer to the major holiday season of the year, it seems some people are already stressed out. I overheard two women discussing Christmas gifts and traveling for the holidays. One of them was worried about getting off work. The

other mentioned all the gifts she needed to purchase. Stores already have Christmas décor everywhere you look. Now, don't get me wrong - I LOVE Christmas and the beauty and reason for the season; but one of my very favorite days of the year is Thanksgiving.

One year was very special for me. My

daughter, Sarah, had just moved to New York City (16 years ago!). It was to be her first holiday away from home. She loves the holidays and being with family so my husband bought me a plane ticket so I could be with her. I called Sarah and we began talking about being alone for the holidays. As it happened, there were quite a few

Give, in Thanks, to Others (Continued)

young people in New York City who were from Hays. I told Sarah to invite them for dinner.

It was such a joyful experience! Sarah lived in Astoria, Queens and the area was decorated for Christmas. It was like a scene from the movie "It's A Wonderful Life." Christmas music was playing overhead, and old-fashioned decorations were strung from light posts and across city streets. The wonderful aroma of cut pine trees filled the air. I purchased vegetables at a street market, and a turkey from a poultry store. The bread came from a local bakery. Sarah's friends all brought side dishes, and as each person entered, the positive, happy vibes enveloped everyone.

As it turned out, some of the Hays friends (there were around 12-13 of them) brought some of their friends who were alone for Thanksgiving. We prayed together and shared our meal and stories about family and home. As each person left, a word of thanks accompanied by a hug ensued. Those who are still in New York City

continue the tradition! Thanksgiving is a wonderful day to remember how much God freely gives to us.

This year, as I help Ellis County Ministerial Alliance prepare for the community Thanksgiving dinner here in Hays, I recall how important it is to gather - sometimes not as an immediate family, but a community family. Thanksgiving, to me, is a time to not only give thanks, but to GIVE, in thanks, to others. God's love in this instance has not been more evident! The words to Curtis Stephan's song, "Tend The Ground", come to mind:

"We till the earth, we tend the ground; sowing hope and peace where none is found. In selfless love, God's life abounds, we till the earth, we tend the ground. As God provides our every need, with grateful hearts, let us receive - these gifts of love and make return, to bless the world...where hardened hearts have turned to greed, trampling upon the fledgling seed, help us to tend to others' needs, open

our eyes, open our eyes. We till the earth, we tend the ground; sowing hope and peace where none is found. In selfless love, God's life abounds, we till the earth, we tend the ground."

I would like to end with some of the beautiful words from an old familiar song, "Sent Forth By God's Blessing":

"With praise and thanksgiving, to God who is living, the tasks of our everyday life we embrace. Our faith ever sharing, in love ever caring, we claim as our neighbor all those of each race. The seed of Christ's teaching, our inner souls reaching, shall blossom in action for God and for all. His grace shall incite us, his love shall unite us, to further God's kingdom and answer his call."

May this season of thanks fill you with God's joy, peace, and grace.



Cheryl Glassman is the Director of Music at St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church in Hays.

An Attitude of Gratitude

Written by:

Terri Braun

Every Thanksgiving is different. Families flourish with additions like marriages, kids and grandkids and families wane when loved ones pass away. We all have different traditions, and some have no traditions at all. Some choose to have a simple meal while others have the golden-brown turkey with all the fixings. Some celebrate with blood relation, while others have "Friendsgiving", while still others are alone. We each may even have a different definition of family.

There is one thing that is the same though for everyone. Thanksgiving is the one time of the year where we are expected to have thanks at the forefront of our mind. For some this comes naturally, and yet others out there feel they have little to be thankful for.

For most Thanksgivings, my day is fairly quiet. We have a Thanksgiving meal at our house with the traditional ham and turkey. Our company is my mom

and my two boys, all who live in the same town. It feels nothing out of the ordinary as we all eat together often throughout the year. I know that I am truly blessed though, as this is not "ordinary" for some to have a tableful of food and family to enjoy. What is different at our dinner this time of the year is the label of the day...Thanksgiving. With this "ordinary" Thanksgiving of mine, I think of how Thanksgiving shouldn't just be a day, it should be a mindset.

We shouldn't just be thankful and acknowledge it because the day says so. We should have an attitude of gratitude and keep our heart open to God's Presence every day. Then we will see the blessings around us every day, not just on this one day, once a year. An attitude of gratitude does not come easy, nor does it seem to be the "norm" of society today. What everyone should really give thanks for is God and His Presence in our lives. The focus should be on being thankful for Him and not the label of the day. Then there would be no

comparison of how many family members/friends one has, how many material items they possess, or if they can put food on the table. We would all equal, just as God intended.

Our finite minds cannot truly comprehend just how infinite God is. He is almighty and all-powerful. He is above the stars and the universe and is master over floods, earthquakes, wind, water, and gravity. His power is limitless. By His simple words, things exist. He breathed life into man and woman by simply saying so. He created heaven and earth by simply saying so. He created the wonderland of seasons, the magnificence of nature, and the vastness of the galaxies. He created the air we breathe, the sun that rises on us and the moon that lights our way at night.

His Presence is found in the tiniest of living organisms to the raging hurricanes. His Presence is felt among the many who praise and worship him and in the quiet folds of

An Attitude of Gratitude (Continued)

our heart. He is with those that are suffering and those that are rejoicing. He is anywhere and everywhere at the same time. He is bigger than any problem we have and bigger than any situation we have encountered.

I challenge you that the first thing in the morning when you wake up, you should say "Good morning God. I am thankful for You". The day is a gift

itself. It is its very own Thanksgiving. Those holidays can continue to be special because it is labeled a special day, but having that attitude of gratitude throughout the year will only enlighten your mind and open your heart to how truly special those gatherings are. But let us not forget about Him.

I must remember that without Him, I wouldn't have family and friends to

celebrate with, the food on the table or the roof that protects me. Without Him, I wouldn't have the cocoon of love that is poured out during my "ordinary" Thanksgiving dinner. God is what makes it extraordinary!



Terri Braun is the ministry coordinator for St. Nicholas of Myra and the author of several Christian books.



“GOD IS IN CONTROL AND THEREFORE IN EVERYTHING I CAN GIVE THANKS.” – KAY ARTHUR