

Sven's friend Ole stopped by for a visit one day: "How's it going vit your marriage, Ole? Is da honeymoon over yet?" Sven asked.

"Vell, da marriage is doing fine," said Ole. "And Lena – she treats me yust like a Greek god."

"Dat's great," said Sven. "How do you get treated like a Greek god, Ole?"

"Vel, you see, Sven, every night da wife serves me a burnt offering." I love this feast – my favorite day of the year! It's a glutton's delight and a dieter's nightmare! But food is one of the great gifts of life – and to be able to eat every day of our life is one of the greatest things to be grateful for. I remember when I was newly ordained, I took communion on First Fridays to a woman who had emigrated to the United States from Romania when she was 14 years old. Maria was a mail-order bride. I asked her how that went. She was terrified, leaving behind all of her family and going to a man she never had met. The man who had sent for her had already lived in the US for a while – his first wife had died and they had no children. He was 30, Maria was half his age. She said that the night they were married, she put her doll under the bed, and then added "We had a wonderful life together – he treated me well, we had 3 children – and we had food to eat every day." I think we often tend to take the simple availability of food – and plenty of it – for granted. Today is a great day to stop and remind ourselves how blessed we are – just to be able to eat every day.

Eating is also a communion of the human family. Even though we may be eating by ourselves, we are in communion with all human beings who also must eat. Eating is always a communion, a celebration with all those who have labored to bring this food to our tables, and with all those creatures who have lived and died to give us food. For us as believers, it's a symbolic participation in the wedding feast of eternity. And as Catholic believers, food and eating are deeply laden with theological meaning. We are reminded of the SOURCE of our food – God -- and our connection to one another. For example, for the noon meal in a monastery, the monks usually file in solemnly from chanting the Mid-day Office. Sometimes, on the way, they recite a psalm; and then before sitting down to eat, they say a prayer of thanksgiving over the food. Usually, the monks eat in silence, as one of them reads to the others from a book.

There are always servers at table who bring the food, and the monks themselves are encouraged by the rule of St. Benedict not to ask for anything they need, but always to look out for what a neighbor needs. There's a famous story of a monk, who notices as he is eating his soup that a mouse has dropped into his bowl. What is he to do? He is to pay attention to his neighbors' needs, not his own. So he helped himself by calling the server and pointing, "My neighbor didn't get a mouse in his soup." (THE MUSIC OF SILENCE, David Steindl-Rast, OSB, p. 79-80)

Second, there is something transforming – even miraculous – in eating. An American living in Paris enrolled in a 20-week cooking school taught by the chef at an elegant Paris restaurant. But the chef, Bruno, taught much more than simply cooking. The young ex-pat never forgot Bruno's most important lesson: "Remember, he'd tell us as pans started clattering, 'nothing in the kitchen is created or destroyed—just transformed.'"

The man continues "I loved Bruno's classes because they were so eye-opening to me. I've always had a utilitarian view of food. Growing up one of 6 kids, all raising a ruckus at the table, eating to me was like pumping gas: a way of refueling. I paid no attention to the food or the care and effort my mother put into

preparing it. As an adult, I kept the same no-frills attitude – making dinner meant opening a can of whatever was within reach.

“But then the glue that bound that raucous family together – my mother – died, and suddenly life itself seemed so shaky, so fragile. Life needed to be gently nurtured, I thought, and what better place to start than the way I ate? It was too late to ask my mother to teach me her recipes, but I could try my luck with remedial cooking school. 6 months later, Bruno had given me that second chance....”

The young man has no illusions about his new skills in the kitchen, but thanks to Chef Bruno, he has a new appreciation for the “loving attention that was given to me so freely – 3 meals a day – and that I’d taken for granted. Like Bruno said: In the kitchen, nothing is created or destroyed, only transformed. And that would include me.” (From “Food as Love” by Paul Schmidtberger, THE BOSTON GLOBE MAGAZINE, Jan 19, 2014)

Which leads me to my third point – sharing a meal together has another purpose – acknowledging that God is our provider. It’s why we stop to pray before we eat; we need to remember that we do so because we have a wonderfully blessing God. In her book, BREAD OF ANGELS, Barbara Brown Taylor says that if we look at everything around us as coming from God, then there will always be manna, just the way it was provided to Moses and the Israelites in exile. A can of beans or grits can be manna. “It is not what it is that counts but who sent it, and the miracle is that God is always sending us something to eat.”

Which is another way of saying that God is constantly revealing His presence in the world. Are we paying attention? Are we seeing the order in the disorder? Sharing a meal together can be one way to see it. And Thanksgiving Dinner is a major sacrament when it comes to our meals.

The expression ‘breaking bread together’ is significant, Henri Nouwen said, because the breaking and the giving are one singular act. “Isn’t a meal together the most beautiful expression of our desire to be given to each other in our brokenness?” he said. “The table, the food, the drinks, the words, the stories: are they not the most intimate ways in which we not only express the desire to give our lives to each other, but also to do this in actuality? Don’t you think that our desire to eat together is an expression of our even deeper desire to be food for one another?” A meal is always sacred, as long as we’re paying attention.

And finally, Thanksgiving is about family. A 30-ish year old son calls his mother on the phone. As soon as she hears his voice, she launches into a tirade: “So, you couldn’t call sooner? I know what you’ll say. You’ll say “I was SO busy.” So look at the big hotshot! Is he too busy to pick up the phone and call the one who spent 14 hours – 14 hours! In labor bringing you into the world! Too busy to call his poor, aged mother? Too busy to find out how she’s doing? Weeks go by, I never hear from you. Is it so hard to call your mother occasionally?” After all of this, the son has caught on. When he gets a break in the conversation, he asks, “Ok, mom, I get it. SO – how have you been?” “Ahh,” she replies, “Better not to ask.”

But family is even bigger than our blood stock. Family includes our intentional family of friends. Family is all the people in our lives. The ones who came by birth or marriage, or the ones who arrived unbidden and stayed. The ones who seem to be part of our assignment at work, in a parish or on our block. Family and ‘family values’ are the unfortunate subject of a lot of sentimental drivel – and the sometimes darker subjects that can drive us to seek therapy. Anyone who has spent time in counseling for depression or other forms of spiritual distress knows that family dramas are not always happy, and are often sites of pain and pathologies so entrenched we can barely trace their origins. Sometimes it’s just as well not to retrace those entangled paths.

But family also gives us occasions for gratitude and growth. One of the gifts of awakened and maturing adulthood is the capacity to cast a look around at those we were given and make new decisions about how to continue relationships with them that are healthy, gracious, and free. As a friend once put it, “When you get to be an adult, it’s time to rewrite the social contract with your family.”

For some, this might mean taking more distance for a time so old wounds can heal. For others, it might mean coming in closer and reclaiming and renewing precious friendships with those we’ve taken for granted. It’s a good exercise to consider carefully and specifically what we are given and what we hope for in relationship to each person we were assigned by birth or marriage. Unlike the friends we choose, these are the ones to whom we are somehow obliged and from whom we must somehow learn simply because they’re on the ‘mattering map’ like features of the landscape. We may avoid them or even seek to escape them, but we ‘have’ them, and it may be that our best option is to learn to enjoy them.

The charming small children among them are no problem. Neither are the amusing storytellers and the generous makers of meals and the gifted listeners and the patient teachers and the ones who sat beside our beds with chicken soup. Enjoying the intimacies of caring and being cared for is one of life’s chief delights.

Some of the lesser delights may be found in the eccentric uncle, the awkward adolescent with a phone in his hand and a chip on his shoulder, the narcissistic sister who really should get the counseling we’re getting instead, the parent who doesn’t quite understand that we’re grown up. Enjoying them may be more of a project. It may mean looking a little more closely at anger to recognize it as pain, or listening a little more deliberately to tedious stories to hear the hopeful offer of a waiting heart behind the words.

And, of course, for the really hard cases – those who abused their power or the privilege of membership in the family circle for selfish purposes – enjoyment may be too strong a term. For those, the will and grace to forgive may be what to pray for. But when that prayer is granted, even there, there is joy to be found where none might have seemed possible. (adapted from Marilyn McEntyre, WORD BY WORD, p. 40-43)

Today I am grateful for all of you who came to celebrate and give thanks – for food, family, for God and his generosity. For oh so many gifts – infinitely more than we could ask for – or even imagine. HAPPY THANKSGIVING! And THANK YOU FOR COMING!