

## *Warp & Weft: Weaving a Family*

Text: Colossians 3:12-15



This is Thanksgiving week. The origins of this tradition make it a uniquely American holiday, but its customs—food and family—make it more universal than that. This holiday is about gratitude: stopping to give thanks for all of those things we usually take as the given's in our lives. It's about the generosity that real gratitude drives us to, remembering that there are other people—far away and right next door to us—who do not see those same things as given, expected, in their own lives. All those things are what Abraham Lincoln called in his First Inaugural Address “the better angels of our nature.”

But here's something else I think Thanksgiving brings out in us: anxiety. Everywhere in the last few weeks—on the radio and in newspapers and magazines, on television, on-line—I have been hearing pieces about how to make this holiday with your family more *peaceful*. In an election year especially—but maybe every time we know we're going to spend a day with family members we don't see often—we get nervous! What if everyone doesn't get along? What if the Donald Trump fans sit across the table from the Bernie Sanders contingent? What if your parents notice the new tattoo on your daughter's wrist? What if your sister-in-law who goes to a very different kind of church than you wants to talk about how dangerous it is to live alongside people of other faiths? And so there's advice out there: How to avoid discussions about religion or politics, how to deal with disagreements gracefully, how to re-direct a conversation that seems to be headed into dangerous territory.

Family is wonderful...and family can be hard. In the almost twenty years I've been doing ministry as my work, I've learned one thing more often and more deeply than almost anything else, and it is this: there is nothing—no relationship, no worry, no purpose—that is more on your mind or closer to your heart than the people who are part of your family. You can learn everything there is to know about the Bible, or about how to get close to God, and it's of little use to you if you can't stop worrying about your child whose life seems out of control. I can preach the most inspiring sermon I possibly can, and the sound stops dead at your ears if what's on your mind this morning is your mother who is sick or your brother whose cancer has returned. Maybe you know the feeling of sitting in church on Sunday, or at your desk on a Thursday morning, and feeling paralyzed by the argument you had with your spouse the night before, that hasn't yet been resolved. I know that feeling too.

And if you're fortunate enough to have a family, all of those feelings are also invited to gather around the dinner table this Thursday.

Sometimes we think our family issues are a distraction from our spiritual lives. But something happened very early in the story of Jesus—in the Gospel of Mark—that signals something different. It's a story that says Jesus understood how central those relationships with our families are for us.

It's a quick little story, one we're don't usually stop at long on our way through the story of Jesus' life. It comes just after he calls the first disciples to come and follow. Two sets of brothers he calls first: Simon (whom he later called Peter) and Andrew; and James and John. Already we're hearing something about family. Those disciples have brothers, families. They know what it means to be connected to other people. James and John leave their father in the boat, Mark tells us, when they leave to become disciples. Right from the beginning, we see that following Jesus has an impact on the people you love. What happens to us matters to them too.

Mark tells the story in shorthand. Jesus and his first four followers went to the synagogue; Jesus taught there and he did his first healing that day. They left the synagogue and went to the house where Simon and Andrew lived. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, [the story says] and they told Jesus about this. So Jesus took her by the hand and healed her. He "lifted her up", Mark says. Then the fever went away and she served them dinner. That's the whole thing that's written in the Bible.

But it seems to me there's a whole lot that gets left out of this story, a bigger story we can imagine and wonder about. What about this family of Simon Peter? Who were they, and what were their relationships like?

The fact that Simon has a mother-in-law suggests that he also has a wife, and maybe children. His mother-in-law—let's call her Esther—probably lives with her daughter's family because her own husband has died. She too—just like the rest of the family—is dependent on the income of her son-in-law, Simon. So it's no small thing that Simon has just given up his day job to follow this spiritual guru, faith-healer type of guy who just happened to walk through town one day. I can imagine that Esther was more than a little skeptical when her son-in-law called from his cell

phone that first day and said he wouldn't be home for dinner. She's worried—not only for herself, but for her daughter and her grandchildren.

So maybe Simon invited Jesus to his house that Saturday evening because he needed his family to meet this powerful new person in his life. He *needed* them to not be so skeptical every time he mentioned Jesus' name. He wanted them to see what he had seen in Jesus—especially Esther, because, well, you know the influence a mother has over her daughter. He hoped that once Esther met Jesus herself, she'd approve, or at least understand. Because that's not at all the way it was when he first told her about this idea of changing careers, becoming a disciple. "You're doing what?!" she'd said. "You want to be a *'fisher of men'*?" What's that? You're going to put little hooks in their mouths and pull them in? Is there a good market for that kind of catch? Or maybe you think your family won't notice the difference, because you've never been very good at the other kind of fishing either!" And when they'd all gone to bed that night, it had been very quiet, and very tense.

So Simon Peter invited Jesus to come home with him for dinner. Maybe while Jesus taught in the synagogue that day, Simon was only sort of half-listening, because he was anxious about what might happen when they got back to the house. As they walk up to the door, Simon can see that there's no smoke coming up through the chimney, apparently no fire burning to cook dinner. They walk in the front door, and it's really quiet. There's no one in the kitchen. And then Simon's wife comes out of the bedroom where her mother sleeps. "She's sick," she says. The Bible says it's a fever that Esther is sick with, but I wonder if it isn't more likely that she was sick with worry, or sadness. Worry for her family, fear for their future, anxiety about all the ways their life was about to change.

They all look at each other kind of nervously. This is not a good start. "Let me go in," Jesus says; and he goes into her room and closes the door behind him. And when they come out, Esther is strong and cheerful, the way she usually is. Everyone lets out the breath they'd been holding. And maybe she goes and gives her son-in-law Simon a big hug, and says, "Well, I'd better get dinner on the table!" before she hurries off to the kitchen, humming a little.

What happened in that room? How did Jesus heal her? What did he say to her? I don't know; none of us do. But this story, one of the *first* stories of Jesus' ministry of healing, is there to tell us that the relationships that come first in your heart—your family—are part of what you bring with you into a relationship with God—whether you were one of the first disciples or you're one of the last. Jesus *got* that. The healing work that Jesus came to do wasn't just about healing people from physical illness. It was also about restoring relationships. Mending broken marriages. Welcoming lost children home. Softening hearts that have turned hard and brittle.

So how do you find that kind of healing this week, preferably before Thursday? What might Jesus be saying to you this morning as the cracks in your family relationships come into closer view? Two things—two very practical tools—I hope you will take from here this morning.

First: Jesus said, “Pray for your enemies.” (Matthew 5:44) No doubt “enemies” includes ISIS and the government of Syria. But maybe Jesus meant people a little closer to home as well. In a book the Engaging Spirituality group is reading this fall<sup>1</sup>, seminary professor Jane Vennard pointed out that in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word translated as “enemy” can mean “someone with whom you are out of step.” *Someone with whom you are out of step.* That changes the meaning entirely, doesn’t it? We can live—or eat Thanksgiving dinner—right alongside of people with whom we are out of step. Pray for them, Jesus said. Imagine yourself holding the one out of step with you up above your head, lifting them up to God. Then let that person go, into God’s care. As your arms drop back comfortably to your sides, you too are released—from your anger that they can’t or won’t get their life together, your resentment of how much space they take up in your head. Your fear for this person you want only to love. Pray for your enemies, Jesus said...not because it will change them, but because it will change you.

The second tool is embedded in the words from Colossians that were our Scripture reading this morning. You could carry around that hole passage around with you this week: Clothe yourself with compassion and kindness. Be humble. Practice forgiveness. Consciously put on love; fill your heart with thoughts of peace. But after all of that, Paul adds three words that can sound like a non-sequitur: *And be thankful.*

*And be thankful.* That is not a throw-away sentence; this is not just a laundry list of healthy choices. Be thankful because being grateful changes the way you see and what you take in from every person around you. Be thankful because gratitude can pry open your hands when they have been tightly clenched in fear, and unfold your heart even after it has closed in on itself in self-protection over and over again.

Pray for those who are out of step with you.  
Be thankful.

Wherever you are this week—whether you are a host or a guest—let these two practices shape your table—will shape *you*—into a sacrament, a blessing. A well of grace and love and peace for *whoever* you share this holiday with.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Vennard, *Embracing the World*, p. 22-23.