

# Taking your Family for Gratitude

Surprisingly enough, this month's theme for our messages has been "Gratitude." I say surprisingly enough because we've just endured one of the most divisive and accusatory political campaigns of our history. But I suppose the fact that it's over should be grounds enough for honoring the thanks that we feel for bringing us through another election relatively unscathed. After all, we've just celebrated the annual tradition of Thanksgiving which aims to unite us all with warmth and gratitude.

Most of you know, my sermons, or messages, if you will, are mostly inspired by literature, in which I feel a profound attachment - you may say relativity. And that is why I've titled my homily today "Taking Your Family for Gratitude." James Thurber, one of America's greatest humorists, made a career out of writing about his family with fondness as he recalled their individual foibles and idiosyncrasies. There was the aunt who lived in fear of being robbed in her house while she slept and before going to bed would pile all her shoes outside her bedroom door. Before retiring for the night, she would emerge and scream something akin to "This is all I have so don't break in and chloroform me as this is all I have." Then she would throw the shoes, one by one, in various directions down the hall to get the attention of any would-be burglars. A cousin also had premonitions of being suffocated in his sleep and so slept with a full bottle of camphor by his bed. If he felt he was losing his tentative grip on life, he would force himself to awaken and pour the bottle of camphor

over his head to revive himself. Another aunt voiced suspicions about light fixtures which probably leaked electricity into the room when not in use. I'm pretty sure that James Thurber made a tidy living out of his written reflections on his wacky family and so was very thankful for the wealth of material they provided him.

I, too, have stories about my family, most of whose members have passed on quite a while ago, so they cannot call "Foul!" if I remember something a bit differently than it occurred or if I relate a story which paints them in a rather embarrassing light, none of which I would ever do. But my retelling some of these stories has a more serious message than just humor at their expense. I confess that the retelling of these stories brings me much joy and, indeed, gratitude, for the way in which my family raised, nurtured, and loved me, as well as each other.

I'll start with my father. He was one of two children produced by my grandparents and the only boy; hence he was spoiled rotten. On the day he married my mother, my grandmother was fond of saying she looked in to wake him on his wedding day, and almost let him sleep because he was so tired after pulling a double shift on the bread truck. My father had that English dry sense of humor in which you were never quite sure if he was getting the joke or irony of the situation or if he was playing with you. Like Mark Twain, at fourteen, I was sure that my father was an uneducated bigot. He worked in middle management at General Electric, as far as his high school education could take him, and was constantly embarrassing me (intentionally, I thought) by referring to African Americans as the N

word. I would correct him in a superior tone accompanied by eye rolls, but mostly I just cringed and seethed internally when he'd use that terminology. When "All in the Family" made its splash on 70's TV, my brother and I were sure Norman Lear knew my father personally and had based Archie Bunker on him.

But like Mark Twain, I had an "Aha" moment when I witnessed my father undo all the stereotypes I had ascribed to him when I was home one Christmas from college. A neighbor whom we all knew came to our door and asked to speak to my father. I went to fetch him and hung around to see what the man wanted. We had recently gotten a small inheritance which allowed us to move into a suburban home in Fort Wayne. Given it was the 60's, our neighborhood was lily-white. The neighbor had been approached by a realtor friend who revealed that a black doctor and his family had put a deposit on a home on our street, but that if the neighbor could come up with a better offer, there was time to squash the deal. He was seeking commitments from the neighborhood to buy the house out from under the doctor's family.

To my everlasting amazement, my father quietly asked me to open the door, and he moved swiftly to grab the neighbor by the scruff of his coat and the seat of his pants and hustled the neighbor, sputtering something like, "You can't do this to me!" to the open door and physically launched him into a snowbank. There followed from my father words which I'll not repeat, but which made it abundantly clear to the neighbor that his offer was rejected and he was no longer welcome in our house. I'm sure I just

stood there, mouth open, unable to reconcile what I had just witnessed.

Mark Twain had said, “When I was fourteen I was sure that my father was an idiot, but by the time I reached the age of 21, I was astounded how much the old man had learned in seven years.” I never again thought my father to be a racist. He still used racist terminology, but I came to realize that it was his actions rather than his words which defined him.

A lot of memories of my father involved both my father and mother. My mother was as outgoing and extroverted as my father was reticent and straightforward. My mother could talk the arms off a statue. After I moved to Goshen, Indiana, for my first teaching job, my mother and father came to Goshen to help my brother and me and my roommate rehab a house my brother had just bought. Working alone doing wallpaper in my house across the street, she answered the phone and kept a woman who had called and asked for John (my roommate) for a good ten minutes while she explained to the woman, whom she believed to be John’s mother (even though she had never talked to or met the woman) that Doug (me) and her son (John) were across the street helping my brother build a second story on a property my brother had bought. She was about to launch into a lament of how she and her husband were close to retirement but were helping out her sons when my mother stopped to take a breath. The woman, seizing the opportunity, hurriedly broke in, “Will you tell Mr. Hutchings (my roommate) that the book he ordered is in at the library.” The amazing thing about this

story is that no one would have ever known if she had just relayed the message. But my mother got such a kick out of the story, that she had to broadcast it, even if she came out looking the fool.

One of my favorite anecdotes about my parents occurred in 1969 over Memorial Day weekend. It was the date of my brother's wedding which would take place at his bride's parent's home about a two-hour drive from Fort Wayne. My mother had gone earlier to get her hair done at my aunt's beauty parlor. My parents were planning to leave about 1:00 and drive to the wedding. My father decided to kill some time by getting a head start on getting the swimming pool up and running and had taken out the diving board from the pump house and set it on the standards. We drained the pool every winter to about half capacity so there would be no cracking of the cement walls due to ice expansion over the winter; hence the sludge, dead frogs and mice, and general detritus buildup was pretty pronounced, gross and slimy in the pool. While my father was working on the pump, my mother came out to talk to him. She was wearing a housecoat and was pretty much ready for the drive and wanted to speed him up. She sat down on the diving board, which was not secured to the standards, only lying the across them; and she fell, with the diving board, into the pool with all its slime and detritus and dead things. She came up sputtering, and made her way with some difficulty to the other end of the pool which was shallow and afforded a way to get out. Meanwhile, my father, went to the other end to help her; and when she held out her hand for him, he stood there

and said, "How am I ever going to get the diving board out of the pool?" My mother spat out an epithet, and turned around and made her way back to the deep end, retrieved the board, and pushed it ahead of her to the shallow end where she and the board were helped onto dry land. By the time she and my father reached my brother's wedding, she had the whole incident boiled down to a funny story about her and Phil, including the trials of putting her hair back together after a quick shower destroyed any semblance of her former mother-of-the-groom glory.

By the time I was in college, my extended family included my mother's sister, Bernice, the owner of the aforementioned beauty parlor. Bernice and her husband lived frugally because he had a death grip on every nickel that tried to pass him by. Yet he was always generous with me and my brother, hiring us for household chores and over-paying us. They did not have any children, and when he had a heart attack and died two months after retiring from GE, Bernice was free of the shackles he had put on their finances. My brother and I bought a Bassett hound puppy for her that Christmas whom she named Noel and who became her constant companion. Aunt Bernice decided one day she wanted to get a new car and had her heart set on a Ford Thunderbird, a very high-end sports car for a 60-year-old widow. She still owned and worked in her beauty shop, so at the end of the day she called to Noel and still wearing her uniform, went to the Ford dealership. The salesman, looking her and Noel over, reluctantly accommodated her request to do a test drive. She got in the driver's seat; and as was her custom, Noel got in the pas-

senger seat, rested her bottom firmly on the seat, her back planted on the back of the seat, and her forearm supported by the arm rest, looked out on the world as Bernice drove off. When she returned about a half hour later, she said. "Noel likes it. We'll take it." The salesman muttered something about taking time applying for financing; and my aunt replied, "Oh, don't bother. I'll just write you a check."

My Aunt Bernice wound up the final years of her life living with my mother and father in a home they built together in Arkansas on Greer's Ferry Lake. They loved nothing more than to entertain and show off their beautiful A-frame house to anyone who dropped by. I'd tell you of one time when Diane was on the receiving end of my father's obtuseness as he showed some visitors around the house; but that's another story and one for Diane to relate.

Before I met and married Diane (in that same A-frame house, by the way) my family celebrated many Thanksgivings and Christmases in that house in Arkansas. And whenever I would plan to come to Arkansas, the conversation would always center on one thing and one thing only - what we were going to have to eat. Aunt Bernice would plan to make butternut squash on Thanksgiving and would promise a big standing rib roast for the days afterward, two of my all time favorites. My father promised barbecued ribs. Everything started with meal planning it seemed, for that was when the family was together, talking, eating, cooking, and enjoying one another.

And speaking of eating, when we lived in Fort Wayne, we often as a family went to a little bar and restaurant in Hoagland called the Three Kings. It was a local bar which had a family room, great cheap steaks, and pitchers of beer, perfect for a middle class family's budget. It became such a success with the locals that one year it underwent a remodeling project, one of the components of which was to redo the bathrooms. Since the original restrooms were designed to accommodate predominantly a male clientele, the owners decided to reverse the locations of the men's and women's restrooms in order to serve their clients better. One week, we all arrived in the middle of the reconstruction; and predictably my mother and Aunt Bernice excused themselves half way through drinks in order to powder their noses. Paying no attention to the signs posted to warn the patrons of the new construction and the switching of locations of the restrooms, my mother and aunt sauntered into the men's restroom, formerly the ladies'. Fortunately, there were no other visitors in the restroom, and a man who had seen the ladies go into the restroom and realized their mistake, warned men who were about to enter that there were ladies inside. By this time, most of the restaurant patrons were aware of the misunderstanding; and an uncharacteristic silence fell on the family room. Since the walls had only been framed and not fully enclosed and insulated, my mother's and aunt's conversation was easily heard coming from inside the restroom. As my mother and aunt encountered the urinals mounted to the walls, the dialogue went something along these lines:



Harriet (my mother): Bernice, do you know how to use these things?

Bernice: I think you have to back onto them, but why did they hang them so high up?

Harriet: And make them so short? I don't think we can mount them like this. You're shorter than I am, and I can barely manage it.

Bernice: Well, I can't imagine the owners putting in these fixtures if they want happy customers.

Harriet: Oh my god, Bernice. We're in the wrong restroom. These are men's urinals.

Bernice: Oh no, I think you're right. Let's get out of here.

When they emerged, they were met by applause from the restaurant and the man who had kept others from entering. He said on greeting them, "Nice try, ladies, but you just don't have the right equipment."

So, what's my intention in revealing many of my family's funniest and most embarrassing moments? It's simply this. My father was a simple hardworking man who loved his family, and had not a judgmental bone in his body. He always accepted things that people told him unless his common sense warned him of injustice. He passed that on to me.

My mother was a fun-loving soul who looked for the good in every living person. She loved life, and the joys of

living, and looked at every day as an opportunity to learn something new and experience something she had never experienced before. Plus she had the uncanny ability to laugh at herself, and indeed embellish a story if it needed embellishing for the desired effect. She passed these qualities on to me.

My Aunt Bernice was as generous and unprepossessing a person as I've ever met. She loved life, a good meal, and family; and never shied away from meeting every opportunity head on. And she passed those qualities on to me.

For my family I am eternally grateful. I am sure that not every character trait they passed on to me is all good. Everyone has his hangups and uncertainties. But for those qualities that I've discussed in this presentation, I attribute my own happiness in choosing a profession, a lifestyle, and a life partner with which and with whom I am very comfortable and satisfied. For my family upbringing, I truly and sincerely do take my family for gratitude.

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As Wayne would say, with this I close. Some forty or so years ago, I saw an old movie on television. I think it starred Shirley Temple or maybe some other child star of the 30's. I vaguely remember the ending, although I don't remember the basic plot or the main story. At the end of the film, the child was transported back to her grandparents home in Switzerland or Germany or wherever, and they magically came alive just as they were when she re-

membered them. They explained to her that they spent their days in eternal suspended animation; but that whenever they were remembered by family and friends, they came to life. As schmaltzy as the premise was, I remember its bringing a tear to my eyes, thinking that all you had to do to bring your family back to life was to remember them. I'd like to think that I bring my family to life every day when I remember them; and furthermore, for the past twenty minutes or so, maybe I've brought my family to life not only for me, but for you as well.

May it be so.