



A Thanksgiving List

TEXT
Romans 12:9–18

November 24, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Last week, my friend Cheryl received a Thanksgiving list. The list came from her mother in California. Cheryl's parents are coming for Thanksgiving. The list was not about food. The list was about what topics they will not discuss during their visit. Cheryl's mom said she would like it to be a "nice" Thanksgiving.

When I asked what precipitated this list, Cheryl told me that this past summer, when she and her husband Steve were visiting her parents in Santa Barbara, Steve and her Dad, Bill, were out golfing. Bill turned to Steve and asked what he thought about the debacle of all the Democratic candidates running for President. Steve told his father-in-law he was leaning toward supporting Bernie Sanders. Bill was appalled. He told Steve that Bernie Sanders was a communist and not even an American. Steve pointed out that Sanders was actually a socialist, and there was a great difference between communism and socialism and that Sanders was also a senator from Vermont, and the last time he looked at the Constitution of the United States, you had to be a

citizen in order to be a member of the United States Senate.

Bill replied that he did not see a difference between communism and socialism and that Vermont, like most of New England, was for all intents and purposes part of Canada, so none of those people should be able to vote anyway. The visit went downhill from there. So Cheryl's mom sent a list. Perhaps you also have a list or are in need of one for this year's Thanksgiving dinner.

As we gather around our tables, according to the Public Religion Research Institute, 74 percent of Americans say we are extremely polarized as a nation. Three fourths of the nation says we are not just polarized; we are EXTREMELY polarized. An article published last year in the Journal of Science matched travel data in 2017 from 10 million cell phones with voting records and claimed that when there was a mix of political affiliations at Thanksgiving dinner, the time spent together decreased by 25 percent from 2016. We spent less time together because we are so polarized. That is why Cheryl's mom sent her list.

The Apostle Paul has a list too. It is not a list of topics. It

is a list of behaviors. At the heart of the Christian tradition is the claim that our actions, our behavior, shape our thinking and our thinking shapes our behavior. Paul is speaking to the new fledgling community of Christians in Rome, the greatest city in the empire, and he is telling them how to act as Christ followers, as Christians. He is telling this new group of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians how to live with one another as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the Saints. Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not return evil for evil. But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it

is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.

It is a different kind of Thanksgiving list because we are supposed to show a different way of living; a different way of behaving because we are followers of Jesus Christ.

If I you will permit me, I would like to share with you my own Thanksgiving list. The first thing on my list would be to pray.

When I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, I was elected to the faculty evaluation committee. This is the committee that oversees tenure and promotion. One professor was up for tenure and when comments were invited, a senior professor who was very respected wrote a scathing evaluation saying that her scholarship was shoddy and she had earned a reputation as a poor teacher. Clearly, in his view, she was not worthy of tenure. He sent copies of his evaluation to the whole faculty.

She was devastated because she had thought him to be a friend. For months, she could not talk to him. For months, he did not seek her out to explain his position. I would watch them in meetings, and they would not even acknowledge one another. I considered them both friends and spoke to each of them urging them to talk with one another. She was too hurt and angry. He was too sure he was right and frustrated that she received tenure after all.

Then one day I noticed a change. We were together for a faculty lunch, and there was

a seat open next to him. She came into the room and, to everyone's surprise, she sat down next to him. Then, she quietly greeted him and said, "Good afternoon, professor."

Startled, he turned to her and replied, "Good afternoon, professor." It was a small gesture, but very significant. That afternoon, I saw her on the quadrangle and asked her about it. She said that she had begun to pray differently. She told me that for months she had been praying that God would change him. But then the Holy Spirit put this idea in her head that she was focusing her prayers on the wrong person. So, she started to ask God to change her; to help her see that this colleague was a child of God; that he was loved by God just like she was loved by God. It enabled her to reach out to him.

The Apostle Paul writes, "Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them."

So, when you are at dinner on Thursday and someone across from you at the table says something that makes you crazy ... pray. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you see them as a child of God. Even as they are talking, look at them and say in your heart, "Lord, help me see them as your child." It may be through gritted teeth, but if you say that prayer, it will change you.

The first thing on my Thanksgiving list: Pray.

Paul says love one another with mutual affection. Outdo

one another in showing honor. Joyce Mercer teaches at Yale Divinity School. Joyce told me that years ago when she was struggling with a friend, instead of being critical first, she would start with being appreciative. Instead of starting with something like, "You know what your problem is ..." or "The reason you are wrong is ..." she would discipline herself to start off with "You know what I appreciate about you is ..." She reminded me that Western thinkers, especially people with a lot of degrees, are trained first to be critical. We are trained to listen to someone talking and to immediately try to figure out how their logic is faulty or how their opinion does not hold.

Joyce thinks that Jesus first looked at people with appreciative eyes, not critical eyes. Oh, there were certainly times when he was critical, but that came later. The next time someone expresses an opinion that you think is absurd, just for a moment, suspend your critical mind and engage first your appreciative mind. "I appreciate how much of an idiot you are." That is really not what the Apostle Paul is calling us to do. Instead, say something like: "I appreciate that you are really passionate about this." "I appreciate that you are willing to engage me in conversation." "I appreciate that we are in different places about this, but we are here at the same table."

For my Thanksgiving list: Pray. Then the first words out of your mouth: I appreciate.

Paul also says, “Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.” “Do not claim to be wiser than you are.” A few weeks ago, we had an instructor from the Kansas City Center for Conflict Resolution. She said one of the most powerful phrases in conflict resolution is: “Help me understand” “Help me understand” is cited by many leadership gurus as one of the most valuable phrases for great leaders. These leadership experts who are paid to coach corporate CEOs say “Help me understand” is one of the “million dollar phrases.”

At Thanksgiving dinner, when someone says something that bothers you, say something like: “Help me understand how you came to this position.” “Help me understand how you have become so passionate about this.” Not “Help me understand how a daughter of mine could be so wrong,” but “Help me understand how you see things so differently than I do.” Now there is an opening for a conversation.

My Thanksgiving list: Pray. First words: I appreciate. Second words: Help me understand.

I was invited to preach at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, a suburb of Atlanta. I visited the youth class during Sunday school and met Ben and loved him right away. Ben was 13 and funny and smart and quirky. He struggled with social boundaries, which I discovered right away when he turned to me and said, “Just so you know. I am on the autism spectrum.”

“Oh, okay,” I said.

Ben continued, “I am what they call ‘high functioning.’ That means I am very smart, but I just don’t get a lot of social cues. It means I don’t relate well, especially to other kids. I do okay with some adults but not in a creepy way.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I said.

I received a note later from Ben’s mom, Sandra. She told me Sunday afternoon, Ben recited my sermon almost verbatim and talked about my teaching in Sunday school. From time to time, I would get notes from Ben. In high school, Ben had an assignment where he had to shadow some adult for a day, and he asked if he could come follow me around Columbia Seminary. I told him I didn’t think it would be very exciting. He wrote back that he knew it was a school for ministers so he was prepared to be really bored, but he had to shadow someone and he thought it might as well be me. We had a great day together.

Ben graduated from Tucker High School and decided to go to the University of Nevada Las Vegas because they had some kind of a gaming degree. Sandra told me that he dropped out after the first year when he realized he could make more money as a dealer, so he went to dealer school for six weeks and started working in a casino. The last I heard was that Ben had a girlfriend, his first one, and was doing well — even though Sandra was disappointed that he had left college.

So, I was surprised when Sandra called me and in a teary

voice, said she wanted to let me know that we had lost Ben. I did not understand, so I asked Sandra, “What do you mean we lost Ben?” And Sandra said she just thought it got too hard. I asked her, “Sandra, what got too hard?”

“Oh, Rodger,” she said, “I think life just got too hard for Ben.” She told me he had messed up with his girlfriend and she broke up with him and then he had not shown up for work so he got fired and then in the midst of all that sadness, he decided he did not want to live anymore. “That’s how we lost Ben,” she said.

Sandra told me that what she regretted most was that in their last conversation, she was so mad at him for messing up with his girlfriend and losing his job, they both ended up yelling at each other, and she did not tell Ben that she loved him. “I wish I had told him I still loved him,” Sandra said.

“Oh, Sandra,” I told her, “I know Ben knew that you loved him. I know even when he was at his saddest, he knew his Mom loved him.”

“Yes,” Sandra said, “I believe that. I just wish I had said it to him.” I helped lead Ben’s memorial service; his service of witness to the resurrection. And we all told Ben how much we loved and missed him.

More important than being right, more important than persuading someone to think like you do, Paul reminds us to let love be genuine. He reminds us to love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one

another in showing honor. Live in harmony with one another. If it is possible, as far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.

My Thanksgiving list: Pray. First words: I appreciate. Second words: Help me understand. Finally: Love.

Paul the Apostle also wrote 1 Corinthians 13:13. Now, these three abide: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.