

Thanksgiving Day, 2017
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond
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So, how will you stuff your turkey today?

Many will stuff their turkey with classic bread stuffing. Others will make oyster stuffing, or chestnut stuffing. Some make a sausage stuffing, or a cornbread and country ham stuffing.

My family didn't actually *stuff* the turkey at all. We ate a Pennsylvania Dutch Potato filling that is cooked in a casserole dish. Celery and onions, sautéed in butter. Parsley and cheese. And butter. Mashed potatoes mixed with heavy cream... and butter. Then when you bake it, you put pats of butter on top. Delicious.

I learned how to make potato filling when I was a teenager, but mom did not really teach me how to cook a turkey. So in 1990, I was a bit nervous when I was put in charge of baking the turkey at the rectory in Petersburg. Others were bringing country ham, raw oysters, side dishes. I was in charge of the turkey.

My mom told me what I needed to do – how to thaw the turkey, how to bake it and baste it.

I did everything she told me. Well, *almost*. I apparently failed to write down a very important instruction. I forgot to remove the plastic bag full of giblets which is stuffed inside the turkey when you buy it.

I forgot. As the turkey began to bake, the kitchen smelled great. And then, as we got closer to the arrival of the guests, the kitchen smelled a bit funny. It smelled like... burning plastic.

My turkey was stuffed with the wrong thing... it was stuffed with melting polyethylene! The turkey was ruined. I thought Thanksgiving was ruined. But as the guests arrived, they assured me that with the ham and oysters and side dishes, we would have plenty to be thankful for. So in a house which smelled like a chemical plant, we gave thanks...

On Thanksgiving Day, we hear many stories about what gets stuffed in the turkey. On *this* Thanksgiving Day, in the first reading, we hear a story about another kind of animal and another kind of stuffing!

We hear the story of a large fish, which gets stuffed with a reluctant prophet named Jonah.

Basically, the story goes like this: Jonah is minding his own business, when one day God calls him to go to a large city called Nineveh. God wants Jonah to preach to the citizens

there, so that they can repent of their sins.

There's only one problem – Jonah does not like the people in Nineveh. He finds their faithless way of life to be disgusting, and he does not want them to repent. He wants them to be punished by an angry God.

God told Jonah to go this way to preach in Nineveh, but Jonah goes the other way, toward Tarshish, to try to run away from God.

It's never smart to try to run away from God!

As Jonah tries to flee, the sailors discover what he's up to and throw him overboard. And that is when it happens. Jonah becomes the stuffing for the whale (or the large fish, whichever translation you prefer!).

Two things to pay attention to in this vivid Old Testament story. First, the fish eventually spits Jonah back onto the shore. Guess where? Right near Nineveh. If God wants you to go somewhere, eventually he's going to get you there!

Second point – notice what Jonah does when he is stuffed into the belly of the fish! He *prays*. As Jonah prays in that dark, dank place, he confesses that he has sinned. But how does he end his prayer? With thanksgiving. With gratitude.

Stuffed in the dark, dangerous place, with no reason to hope, Jonah praises God for his goodness and generosity. He thanks God for the gift of his life.

It's *easy* to be grateful when everything is perfect. It is easy to offer thanksgiving when your marriage is in good shape, and your kids are in good shape, and your savings account is in good shape, and YOU are in good shape!

It's so easy to offer prayers of thanksgiving when you and your *loved ones* are fine, and the *turkey and its stuffing* are fine.

But there are times when people of faith are called to give thanks - to declare God's goodness – when things are dark, or dangerous, or difficult. We are called to say thank you, even when the bird is ruined and the house smells like plastic.

That is an important message for all of us, as we celebrate this great national holiday.

After all, it was President Lincoln who formally established a national thanksgiving holiday. He called on all Americans to do three things: first, to thank Almighty God for the blessings He bestowed on our land. Second, to do penance for what he called our 'national perverseness and disobedience.' And third, to reach out 'to widows, orphans,' and those in need.

What an amazing trinity of suggestions!

What I find most fascinating about President Lincoln's proclamation is the year in which he signed it – 1863. Our nation was in the third year of the horrific War Between the States at that time. This was not a time of national peace and prosperity! The president chose one of the darkest moments in American history, and he said to the nation, "Thank God. Do penance. And do Justice."

President Roosevelt adjusted the date of Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of November. When? 1939! The effects of the Great Depression could still be seen in our land. The Nazi terror was at hand, and the winds of war were racing across Europe. And it was precisely THEN, in those dark days, that the Roosevelt called us to be grateful.

Gratitude often flows naturally from our souls when everything is going well. But gratitude can SAVE our souls when we CHOOSE to be thankful even in our darkest times.

Today's Gospel tells us that the disciples got into the boat with their bellies full. Jesus had just multiplied loaves and fishes. They were stuffed with this miraculous meal.

You might think that such a miracle would have filled them with gratitude...but, like us, they apparently had short attention spans. Because, as they sailed out onto the Sea of Galilee, and as the storm began to rage, their gratitude quickly disappeared, and their fears took over.

Even Peter seems to forget what God has done for him. He focuses on what he *doesn't have*. He focuses on the storm that is right in front of him.

There are days when the storms in my life feel overwhelming. What I am learning is that the Lord will get me through each storm if I pay less attention to the wind and waves, and focus more attention on all of the ways that God has blessed me and strengthened me and saved me in the other dark and stormy times of my life.

Gratitude turns *what we have* into *more than enough*. Gratitude gives me hope. Gratitude keeps me focused on Jesus.

So, even when we are stuffed into dark places in our lives, we can choose gratitude.

Today, take time to offer specific prayers of gratitude...

"Lord, thank you for our world, because.... Thank you for our nation, because... Thank you for my family, because.... Thank you for my neighbor, because... Thank you for my faith, because... Thank you for my life, because..."

That kind of gratitude makes us strong, and makes us generous.

On Thanksgiving Day we celebrate the Eucharist. Eucharist – a word which means thanksgiving. And with God’s help, we can say thank you, no matter where we are.

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