

# **GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel  
Preached on Sunday, November 17, 2013**

## **Turn Off That Dinging Phone; I've Got to Think**

We're busy these days, aren't we? We've got a dinner to prepare. Thanksgiving is coming, and it is a mere week and a half away now. My smart phone has a calendar that tells me when important dates are coming up, but I'm not so sure it was a good idea to program the phone this way. It kind of ratchets up the stress when it dings and plays "Carol of the Bells." As of this morning it peremptorily announced that in 37 days it will be Christmas. Maybe I should turn the darn thing off. I've got enough to do today, you know, and Thanksgiving is really soon.

We're having a dinner party, a hallowed institution, and it got me thinking about dinner parties in general. Obviously my sermon title has something to do with it. When you're going to do a dinner party, what do you do? I love dinner parties. They make me nervous while planning, but I have given them successfully.

When you're going to do a dinner party, what's the first thing you do? You might invite your guests after deciding whom to invite. Then what I do is clean. That's number two on my list, which I go over carefully because it's something I must do. There's nothing like guests to make me really clean.

## **Watch Out for Guests' Diets: Gluten-Free, Vegan, Vegetarian, Low Carb, Low Salt, Low Fat, etc., etc.**

The next step for me is to consider the guests' various diets. It didn't used to be a step. I don't think my parents ever had to consider this before giving a dinner party, saying to themselves, "You know, Marty's gluten-free so we have to think about the menu." But we are much more sensitive to peoples' diets nowadays, aren't we? And that's a good thing.

We have vegan friends, and we have vegetarian friends. We have people who cannot eat gluten. We have people who might not be able to have wine, and so on. You must allow for all these details. Plan the menu, shop, cook, set the table, greet the guests, and then off you go.

You're ready, we hope, and you're having your dinner party. There's no stopping it once the guests come to your door. Thanksgiving is almost here, and it's a different kind of dinner party, isn't it?

## **Try Beef Wellington; Nobody Will Eat It**

Last year at this time, I was getting a massage. I remember because it was right before Thanksgiving, and my masseuse was telling me about making beef Wellington. She always makes beef Wellington for Thanksgiving. You might ask yourself why? Along with the turkey and the stuffing and the gravy and, you know, everything she makes for the traditional dinner, why on top of all that, does she also make beef Wellington? (You know, a fillet of beef covered with pâté de foie gras and baked in a casing of pastry.)

Last year she had no time to make the beef Wellington, and as she was telling me this, she was becoming more and more agitated and getting stronger and stronger in her rubbing and kneading of my flesh. Finally I had to say, “You’re . . . ouch! Okay, let’s stop and you tell me about the beef Wellington, and then we’ll go on.” The very thought of making the beef Wellington was stressing her out because she didn’t really want to make it.

By the way, most of her family are vegetarians, so guess who’s not eating the beef Wellington. I think maybe she and perhaps a cousin ate it, so I said, “Why are you making the beef Wellington?” She answered, “My mother made it; my grandmother made it; my great-grandmother I think came from England, and she made it, and so on. And therefore I have to make the beef Wellington.”

### **Forget the Mince Pie Too**

So I listened to her for a while, and then we got back to the massage. I thought it best to get her agitation out of the way and let her vent her emotions before going on. Because we do that, don’t we? Why did my grandmother continue to make a mince pie every Thanksgiving, and no one ate it? No one wanted to eat it. It looked strange. For me as a kid, no way! Some of the adults may have considered it, but if nobody ate it, why did she continue, year after year, to take the time to make a mince pie?

### **And Cut the End of the Ham to Fit the Pan**

Maybe you’ve got something you make. For me as a kid at home, it was pearl onions. I was never sure why my mother insisted that we had to have pearl onions on Thanksgiving. You had to have a lot of vegetables anyway, but no one ate those. Yet she made them year after year.

Why did a young woman cut off the end of a ham every time she bought one? Has anybody ever heard of this? This is great. Why in the world did she cut off the end of the ham? When she was asked, the woman nonchalantly answered, “Well, my mother did it.” And if her mother was asked, she indifferently said, “Well, *my* mother did it.” So grandmother was asked, “Why do you cut off the end of the ham,” and she thoughtfully replied, “Well, I’m not sure why, but I always do. My mother told me that she had a small pan, and the ham didn’t fit, so that’s why we cut off the end of the ham.”

### **Listen in, Write It Down, Turn It in**

And on the bus one time, I wrote down a brief conversation between two women who were strangers to me. Has anyone heard of a website called “Overheard in New York City”? I’m not sure it’s still on line, but it is or was a website. People would overhear conversations, write them down, and send them in to this website. Sometimes they were hilarious. You know how you hear things, and if you live in a place like New York City, with nine million people, you hear some doozies. Now with cell phones, God only knows what you’re likely to hear on the bus or in the subway.

This one amused me. It was right before Thanksgiving, and I was going into the city from here. I wrote this conversation down and stuck it in my holiday file. Organized or not, but I did have files on different topics for sermons, and once in a while I’m inspired to pull a file out. This time I said to myself, “You know, I’m writing about Thanksgiving,” and I pulled out my holiday file just a couple days ago. Out popped a conversation that I had totally forgotten.

Two ladies who sat next to me were kind of sleepy, but when they woke up they had a short conversation. One of them I named Debbie, although I don’t know what her real name was. Debbie was telling her friend, “She (presumably her daughter) doesn’t like pie. Can you imagine that? Everybody likes pie. What am I going to make? Chocolate-chip cookies? The kids, they’ll eat a couple. Agnes likes chocolate cake.” Her friend grunted, “Make a cake.” Debbie responded, “The kids, they don’t eat cake. I don’t know. Who doesn’t like pie?” Again her friend grunted, “We got a lot of ham this morning.”

Then they fell asleep again. They never continued their conversation, so I thought, “What does ham have to do with it?” Anyway I wrote it down, and that was in 2004. I wonder where they are now. Maybe Debbie is worrying about pie to this day. Probably nobody eats it, but I bet she still makes it.

### **An Empty Cup and a Chair for Elijah**

Thanksgiving and communion. Jesus and his disciples are at Passover. This final dinner together is solemn, the feast of Passover being what they’re sharing. It’s highly ritualized, kind of like Thanksgiving. They have certain foods, and it’s eaten in a certain way. There’s even a liturgy that is read. And the tradition at Passover is that there is an empty cup and a seat for Elijah. You’ve heard of that? Well, this is the reason why: Because Elijah could someday show up at Passover and announce the coming of the Messiah.

So a very good question to ask is, “Was there an empty cup at the last supper?” It’s a conundrum because I don’t know. “Would Jesus have put out that empty cup?” Elijah’s job is to announce the coming of the Messiah, which of course means that you believe he’s sitting right there.

### **Talk About Great Expectations**

We too have an empty space, I think – a cup and a seat for a guest who almost always shows up on the holidays, even though it's a guest that we don't really want to be with us. Guess who's coming to dinner. It's the guest of expectations, a gift we really don't want. But expectations make Thanksgiving more than a dinner party, don't they? They've got weight and heft in history. And they've got a load of emotion. What are our expectations based on a day like Thanksgiving?

You and I can think this through together. I wrote a couple of expectations down. Of course there's the past, our parents, what they did. Our family, our memories, our history. This involves many people who aren't at the table in body but are here in spirit, gathered around that table. This is why the beef Wellington gets made by my friend and why that young lady cuts off the end of the ham and why mince pie is made, and so on.

Maybe in our heads and hearts there's an idea that we glean from television and movies, the ideal of the way things should be, like the popular Norman Rockwell picture that shows a family at the dinner table. Maybe it's a nebulous standard of perfection that we can't meet no matter how hard we try. That we turn ourselves inside out in making the effort. And what happens to us inside when our expectations aren't met.

### **Here's an Antidote to Dysfunctional Thinking**

I wonder if anyone's familiar with a movie called "Pieces of April." It's not a well-known film, and the star is Katie Holmes. It was an independent film, and it's really great. If you've never seen it, I highly recommend Netflixing it or using one of the many ways we can get old movies now. It's not old, old like the kind I love on TNT, but "Pieces of April" was made a while ago, and it's about a splintered, dysfunctional family.

Mom and dad and a son and daughter are getting ready to go and have dinner at the house of their other daughter, played by Katie Holmes. She's the black sheep of the family, and she has moved away from home to live with her boyfriend in a tenement in a not-so-great area of New York City. The black sheep gets up early, and she's not very skilled at making dinner, but she does her best. You can tell she's thrilled that her family accepted her invitation this year, even though there's a lot of bad water under that bridge.

Mom has breast cancer, and she's not thrilled at all to be going to dinner at the house of her daughter, who has caused her so much heartbreak. Dad's just trying to placate everybody. Their son and another daughter are doing their own thing in the back seat, and then they pick up grandma and off they go. I think it's a movie not to be missed at this time of the year, especially if you start thinking that everything needs to be perfect. "Pieces of April" is a good antidote to that kind of thinking. The end is super.

### **The Great Meal Is Getting Subsumed in Christmas**

You and I are probably already watching a lot of Christmas movies, seeing a lot of Christmas decorations, and hearing a lot of Christmas music on the airwaves, which is why I have chosen to pause and think about Thanksgiving. It's a wonderful holiday, but of course it's getting subsumed in the early onslaught of Christmas activities. The last scene in "Pieces of April" (If you're going to watch the movie, I don't want to ruin it for you.) is, of course, a Thanksgiving dinner. It shows connection, love, and connection in spite of and amid chaos. The kind of Thanksgiving day that you and I have had.

Another reminder of Thanksgiving is one of the Broadway musicals that I have been lucky enough to see, "Fiddler on the Roof," which I love. It's a really great sing, and the cast sings one of my favorite songs, "A Sabbath Prayer." (I even thought of asking Joyful Noise if they could do it, but I don't know if it's in their repertoire.) It would be a great song, sometime, to sing "A Sabbath Prayer."

The musical starts out with Tevya and his family getting ready for the Sabbath meal, and it seems to require as much preparation and as much stress as Thanksgiving. They've got to be ready before the sun sets, and the good china, and the tablecloth has to come out, as well as the silver. They're very poor. Tevya has just sung "If I Were a Rich Man." His wife is going nuts because they have some extra guests for whom they hadn't prepared, and so on.

Then they start the process of their Sabbath meal. It's not as serious as Passover, but it's an echo of Passover such as Jesus and the disciples shared. The mom starts to light the candles and pray the prayer, and the song starts, the singing of "A Sabbath Prayer." In a dramatic sequence, the little family is magnified and multiplied on stage. Scenes of other families in the town of Anetefka having Sabbath dinner start to pop up all over in the darkness. Similar, but not perfect, all of them worshipping God and having a meal together in gratitude with the power of connection.

### **All Thanksgiving Tables Are Connected**

Our communion tables are all connected too. Including those places in Binghamton High School, right down the street where a sign is up announcing dinner on the 28<sup>th</sup> from 11:30 to 2:00, and all are welcome. Our table is connected to all those other tables. Communion, Thanksgiving, and us.

In 2010, 17.2 million households didn't have enough food to eat, and 9.8 percent of households today have children who do not eat enough daily. One in eight people in this world is starving. And so we try to do our share by stocking our CHOW closet. In addition we're going to put together our Thanksgiving baskets tomorrow evening. And next Sunday they go out to help those in need. There are soup kitchens right down the street.

### **The Cup Is Overflowing for the Starving**

I think one of the best ways, honestly, to combat the invisible but present guest of expectations, who shows up at holy times or holiday times, is to feel that connection despite the chaos and then to serve in some way. In doing so we realize how big our Thanksgiving table is. Maybe it isn't perfect. Even the people around it aren't perfect, but it's a huge table. We must endeavor to realize just how really big it is.

We glimpse the eternal feast, where the cup is overflowing for everybody. Everybody. Those who are starving in body and those who are starving in spirit.

*Amen and Happy Thanksgiving.*