



Café (boldcafe.org) is a monthly on-line magazine for and with young adult women made possible from support from women's groups active in Women of the ELCA (welca.org), the women's organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

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Table grace

by *Emily K. Hartner*


Our dining room table hasn't been clear of clutter for months—since the beginning of the pandemic. Pre-COVID, we used it almost solely for eating. Now it has become a work table, a homework table, a craft table, a game table, and a puzzle table. It also remains a place to eat. When it's dinner time, we shove the clutter to the end of the table to make room for our plates.

There's a good chance something else might happen with our table this year. For the first time since it's been in our house, it may very well become a Thanksgiving table. We're doing our best to figure out a safe way to visit family for the holiday. Still, with a return to in-person school, the scheduling of COVID tests, and vulnerable family members, it might not be possible.

I'm working at church alone as I write this reflection. Earlier in the day, I wandered down to the sanctuary. Our windows are clear glass, so the morning light creates a beautiful glow — warm and inviting. But I felt a little sad, walking through that space. A space designed for gathering, it hasn't been used since March. And the table? The one we used to gather around weekly to share in a meal of grace? Well, it looked lonely in the cavernous room.

Bread and glass of wine for Communion. The table of Holy Communion is a thanksgiving table. Eucharist — the meal that happens at the table — is a Greek word for thanksgiving. It's the place where we thank God for all that God has done for us through Jesus and throughout history.

While I have grieved much over the past seven months, what I want to return to more than anything is the meal that God provides at that table. I want to look people in the eye again as



I tell them that the small piece of bread and a tiny sip of wine is “for you.” I want to think of each of their stories as they approach the table. I want to ponder without judgment or expectation all the different stories that come to holy table. Holy food for holy people, we sometimes say.

But something interesting has happened since we began working – and worshiping – from home. Our homes have become our sanctuaries. Our dining room tables have become places of prayer and thanksgiving. In this switch from communion table to dining room table, does God call the many tasks that happen there holy? The work we do there is holy. The learning that happens there: holy. Holy describes the work, the nourishment, the fun.

An altar was once a place of sacrifice. It was the table on which you would place a sacrificial lamb to please the gods. It no longer carries that sense of sacrifice for those of us who believe that Jesus’ life was the ultimate sacrifice for us. However, I do believe that all the work, the play, and the meals that happen around dining room tables are pleasing to God as they represent our most faithful work. Our tables are holy, not because they are places of required sacrifice. But because they are where we can be ourselves and where God takes our work – our lives – and claims them as holy.

Our thanksgiving tables may look different this year. They may have a few empty chairs that we wish were filled. They may be graced with less food than in years past. But leave the clutter. Leave all the signs of that hard work you’ve been doing. You might even use the remnants of all that work as your placement. And then, when it’s time to say grace, give thanks. Give thanks not for what you have, but for the goodness of God, who claims all your messy work and calls it good.

Discussion questions:

1. Has COVID changed your Thanksgiving plans this year? If so, how?
2. What kind of holy work has taken place at your tables? Have you understood–or can you understand–it as holy?
3. How would you live your life differently if you knew God was claiming all of your work as holy?

Closing prayer

O God, you give each of us gifts to use to do your work in this world. Grace our tables of work, play, study, and meals so that we come to see our whole lives as being worthy of your love. In whatever work we do, use it to further your reign on this earth. Amen.

The Rev. Emily K. Hartner is the pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Charlotte, N.C. She lives in Charlotte with her husband, Ian, 4-year-old son, Oliver, and two French Bulldogs. In her free time (ha!), she enjoys reading and exercising. She currently also serves on the ELCA Church Council.



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Faith Reflections: Reclaiming gratitude

by Emily K. Hartner

Do you remember how this year began? At the turn of the decade, we looked to the new year with “2020 vision”—a play on the year 2020 that I thought was clever at the time. In March, the future looked more unclear.

What was clear was that a global pandemic had reached our shores. Then, the country burned with the injustice of racism at the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. As if that weren’t enough, the country burned as wildfires ravaged the west and then drowned in the waters of hurricanes on the gulf coast. The presidential election has spiraled our nation into a dangerous level of polarization. And to top it all off, we even experienced an earthquake (an earthquake!?) this summer where I live in North Carolina that rattled our house like nothing I’d ever experienced. The whole year feels a bit like a curse, not unlike the Egyptian plagues. I’ve heard some people call it the 2020 Dumpster Fire.

I’ve been thinking a lot about gratitude during this challenging year, especially as we approach a holiday that demands it. I had a conversation (virtually, of course!) early in the pandemic with a group of women from my congregation. Somehow we began talking about the blessings of the pandemic—the gift of being able (being forced to) stay at home, the gift of time, the gift of baking, the gift of taking walks outside, the gift of technology.

To name a blessing – to be thankful for anything during this pandemic – felt like a burden for one woman. For her, the pandemic did nothing more than intensify her feelings of loneliness and isolation. Being unable to recognize a blessing made her feel guilty. Did she wonder if Paul’s encouragement to the Thessalonians to “give thanks in all circumstances” was a command to be thankful – or else – rather than an invitation to take inventory of what we have?

“You know,” I told her, “it’s okay if you believe life sucks.”

I have struggled with this myself during the pandemic. There were times when circumstances were challenging. I knew in my head all the good my faith has taught me. Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property –

along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.” Cognitively, I knew this to be true. But so much of gratitude lies within the heart, not the head. And my heart was not feeling it.

I’ve been thinking a lot about gratitude. Does it lie buried in the rubble of the dumpster fire? And, if so, how do I dig it out?

I have a therapist friend who’s been doing a lot of work in the area of trauma-informed care, especially during the pandemic. She says we’re all dealing with a certain amount of trauma now. She likes to guide people who are having trouble finding positivity or gratitude through an exercise. She asks them to recall when they felt neutral—not necessarily good, but not bad, either. She asks them to identify what they felt during that moment: What they smelled, saw, heard, tasted. If we can recall even neutral moments, we can build new neural pathways that lead to gratitude, she says.

Opening of a tent with a sleeping bag. I engaged with this exercise myself. I thought of the night my 4-year-old son and I camped in our backyard. It was the first cold night after a hot and humid summer. Our tent had that stale smell, revealing we had not aired it out in a while. As we pitched it, my son’s giddy excitement sent him in the tent and out of the tent, in the tent and out of the tent. Though it wasn’t quite the same as cooking over a campfire, we ate macaroni and cheese on our back patio before turning in for the night, reading books by flashlight as we fell asleep to the sound of crickets. The image imprinted in my brain is that my son snuggled down in his sleeping bag: cozy, warm, and safe.

And at that moment and for that moment, I felt, in my heart, truly grateful.

Discussion Questions

1. At what points in your life has gratitude felt like a burden? When has it felt easy? Can you identify external factors that affected your gratitude?
2. Try leading yourself through the exercise mentioned above. Think of a recent neutral moment and how you experienced that moment with each of your senses. Did you discover anything for which you are thankful?
3. How do you cope during challenging times?



Closing prayer

○ God of abundance, I know that everything I have comes from you. Yet sometimes life feels so complicated that I cannot find the words to say thank you. When that happens, forgive me, and send your Spirit—the one who intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Lead my heart to a place of gratitude and to a realization of the abundance that you provide. Amen.

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