

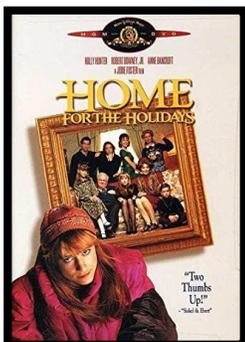
November 18, 2018
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
 “What are we talking about?”

Exodus 14: 1 - 12

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

For years, one of my favorite movies to watch every Thanksgiving was “Home of the Holidays.”¹ Released in 1995, directed by Jodie Foster and starring Holly Hunter, Anne Bancroft, Charles Durning, and Robert Downey Jr. (Ironman). “Home for the Holidays,” tells the story of a Baltimore family’s Thanksgiving dinner. A family that loves each other (you think--you hope), but as the day goes on the wheels come off their family gathering, the apex of the drama coming at the dinner table when they start discussing what’s really going on in their lives. One son’s sexuality. The tenuous employment of a



¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113321/>

daughter. The aging of parents, and the child who stays at home to care for them. There is eating and shouting, stomping, praying, singing, some more yelling, and a turkey that falls in someone's lap.²

I don't watch this movie as much anymore- it's pretty dated, but I think what appealed to me for so many years was the brutal honesty of each of the characters. At some point in the movie each one of them is completely honest- with themselves and with each other- honest about who they are and what is deep within their hearts. It isn't all pretty, but it is honest.

And... it was completely unlike any Thanksgiving dinner I can ever remember. I grew up with wonderful, delicious, joyful dinners, but also dinners where very specific rules were observed. Maybe you know them. Maybe your table had these rules, too. No religion. No politics. Only pleasant conversation.

When my family moved to North Carolina more than a decade ago I got in the habit of telling people that it took some adjustment to get used to a place where politics and religion were perfectly acceptable topics, the things you couldn't discuss were basketball and barbeque.

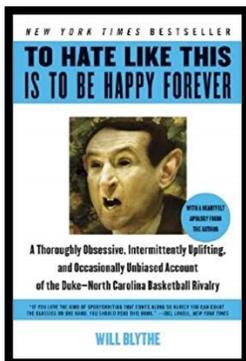
It was, in part, true. In Chapel Hill you really can't discuss basketball or barbeque in mixed company. It can escalate quickly. They take those things seriously. An example of this is a book that was on the bestseller list when I moved there. "To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke-North Carolina Basketball Rivalry."³

Basketball and barbeque were risky conversation topics.

But what wasn't true about what I would tell people was the part about politics and religion. Like just about any other place, those were topics that were considered impolite in social situations. You didn't want to offend. You didn't want to upset the apple cart.

And those aren't necessarily bad things.

² And when it's all over the matriarch, Adele, says, "I'm giving thanks that we don't have to go through this for another year. Except we do, because [they] those bastards went and put Christmas right in the middle, just to punish us."



³ Blythe, Will. "To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke-North Carolina Basketball Rivalry." (New York: Harper, 2006). https://www.amazon.com/Hate-Like-This-Happy-Forever/dp/006074023X/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_o?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1542551433&sr=8-1

But ... I worry, I fear, I suspect that our attempt to be polite has meant that we don't know how to talk with each other about things that are real. About things that matter.

Have you ever changed the topic away from something that mattered, something about which you cared a great deal, just to keep the peace, or out of fear that you might upset the peace?

Sometimes we think that's a southern thing, but I don't believe that's the case.

Just this morning in the New York Times there is a piece in the opinion section written by a comedian entitled, "Safe Topics to Discuss this Holiday Season."⁴

I worry, I fear, I suspect that our attempt to be polite has meant that we don't know how to talk with each other about things that are real. About things that matter.

I'm not the only one who is concerned about this. Consider some data shared by Jonathan Merritt, someone who writes about faith and culture for a living, from a study he commissioned to look at how Americans talk about their faith.

To start, we need to know that 70% of Americans identify as Christians.

And yet the study showed that 1/5 of that 70% reported have had not even one spiritual conversation in the past year.

60% claim they have had a spiritual conversation rarely- as in one or two a year.

And only 7% of Christians claim to talk about spiritual matters on a regular basis.

The most shocking number of those statistics is that those who go to church are only slightly more talkative. Instead of 7%, 13% of church-goers say they talk about spiritual things on a regular basis.

Merritt wrote: "According to my survey, a range of internal conflicts is driving Americans from God-talk. Some said these types of conversations create tension or arguments (28 percent); others feel put off by how religion has been politicized (17 percent); others still report not wanting to appear religious (7 percent), sound weird (6 percent) or seem extremist (5 percent). Whatever the reason, for most of us in this majority-Christian nation, our conversations almost never address the spirituality we claim is important."⁵

That's religion.

We're not good about talking about politics, either. Unless we're anonymous or posting something online, we seem to have lost the ability to talk about the matters facing us, our nation, and our world.

We struggle to listen. To learn. To be changed by the people we encounter.

Or maybe I shouldn't speak for you.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/17/opinion/sunday/thanksgiving-family-political-discussion.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/13/opinion/sunday/talk-god-spirituality-christian.html>

I struggle in this current environment to listen, to learn, to be changed by the people I encounter. And it might be hardest with the people I love most, family.

I worry, I fear, I suspect that our attempt to be polite has meant that we don't know how to talk with each other about things that are real. About things that matter.

It's certainly not the example the Bible sets for us.

Our reading for today is one of the texts that tells what the structure should be for the Passover meal.

The Passover meal, where they talk about the bitterness that has happened, the angel of death that passed over, the bread that didn't have time to rise, the animal that fed them, the land where they were slaves and how God led them out of that.

It is hard conversation. It is real conversation. It is a painful memory. And it is for each and every person at the table. IN fact, the youngest at he table is the one who answers the question, "Why is this night different from other nights?"⁶

And Jesus. Jesus didn't shy away from hard things, hard conversations.

Almost everything he did was a scandal.

He talked about taxes, immigration, religion, healthcare, culture, society- its goods and its wrongs.

I worry, I fear, I suspect that our attempt to be polite has meant that we don't know how to talk with each other about things that are real. About things that matter.

This Thanksgiving, I think we need to start turning things around.

And talking about important things.

Talking about real things.

Now... I want to be clear. The evidence is clear. We're out of practice.

Most of us, myself included, aren't good at these big conversations.

It's probably not a good idea to start by asking how people voted in the last election.

Or, even worse, to begin by telling people how you voted, or what's wrong with the church they go to, or don't go to, or, even worse, the way they cooked the turkey.

But that doesn't mean we can't start somewhere.

Several years ago, Arlie Hochschild, a professor in California, realized that she never interacted with anyone outside of her little world. She saw us getting more and more divided. And she decided that wasn't okay. That the crust of our society has grown far too thin, and that we need to nurture it back to health, for us to be healthy.

⁶ <http://www.jewfaq.org/seder.htm>

In an interview with Krist Tippett for the podcast “On Being,”⁷ she said, “So I determined to get out of my bubble and come to know people that were as far-right as Berkeley, California, was left, and to try and climb what I called an “empathy wall” to permit myself a great deal of curiosity about the experiences and viewpoints of people that I knew I would have differences with. It turned out to be an extraordinary experience. It took me five years of really getting to know people, asking where they were born; where their school was; what row they sat in, in school; what their favorite thing to do was; where their ancestors were buried, and in the course of going fishing with them, in the course of really getting to know them, I came up with this idea of a deep story as a way of getting to emotion.”

It took her five years of traveling to Louisiana. Of sitting down with people about whom she knew very little beyond where they were likely to disagree, and to start building relationships. And she started by looking for their deep stories. And then listening. Setting aside judgement. Turning off the things that would normally alarm her, make her want to respond, and listen. Learn.

Five years of visits it took her, but at the end she learned there were things from other sides she could understand. There were points in common they hadn’t seen before.

They didn’t agree, but they had relationships, and isn’t that how we need to start?

I think this is what we must start doing. We, too, must start looking for and listening to these deep stories. And I believe we can start this week. This Thanksgiving.

Maybe ask your sister why she roots for the team that she does.
Ask your uncle what Thanksgiving was like when he was a child.

See if the neighbor who had all of the political signs that disagreed with your own stance will share a favorite Thanksgiving memory with you.

And then listen. Just listen. Don’t think about a response. Don’t think about your next question. Just listen.

Jesus listened to the Samaritan woman. He listened to the Centurion. He listened to Mary and Martha.

And if that goes well, ask another question, Ask someone about a difficult time. See if someone else will tell you a story about a really good day at their job.

Be prepared that not everyone will want to tell you- not everyone will know their own deep story, and even if they do, they may not want to share it.

Think about this- if someone were to ask you about your faith, what would you say? Would you have something to say?

If someone were to want to know your deep story, your interest, your motivation, what would it be?

⁷ <https://onbeing.org/programs/arlise-hochschild-the-deep-stories-of-our-time-oct2018/>

What I know is this. Jesus did not call us to live on the surface of life. Jesus calls us to down into the valleys and up over the rainbow, to be the body, so we and work together, and love ourselves as well as our neighbor.

We've spent decades politely getting ourselves where we are. It won't change over night. But it also won't change if we don't take a step in that direction, and this Thanksgiving, I think it is time to take that step. I'll be with my family in South Carolina. I'm going to try it. Before we get together I'm going to think of one question to ask of each person who will be around the table- one question that I hope will get, at least a little bit, to who they are and why they are.

I hope that you will to. We've got very little to lose. And a lot to gain.

The vocabulary of faith. The conversations of hope. The bonds that are created when we make these things our daily bread, strengthening our connective tissue cannot help but bring Jesus closer.

So let's be bold, friends. This Thanksgiving, let's listen.