

FOR LIFE THAT HELPS AND HEALS AND HOLDS US

A homily delivered by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport R.I. on November 21, 2008

“Well are you ready for ‘Turkey Day!’” asked the clerk at a convenience store where I stop frequently. Turkey Day. I’m not that fond of turkey, but I actually hate that the meaning of Thanksgiving has been reduced to anticipating a large meal that sends us all away from the table having eaten more than we probably should have eaten.

Those who celebrated what we New Englanders insist was the first Thanksgiving were not thinking they would stuff themselves silly at that meal. They were grateful just to be alive after a terrible winter that more than half of their group did not survive. They were grateful they were alive, even with only a meager harvest, and that they had learned they could count on each other. They were grateful for what we take for granted.

When President Abraham Lincoln issued the first Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, it was at a time when most families, North and South, had lost children or neighbors or had children who were themselves in danger. It was a time of national mourning – hardly a time to proclaim “Turkey Day.” Why did Lincoln issue that proclamation? I think he wanted to call attention to the small things that make life meaningful even in hard times.

This is a time of year when I find myself thinking about the small things in my life that turn out actually to have been very important. I think about how much I have received that I did not expect to receive and did not earn. I think this is true for many of us, because many of our most important gifts come from the accidental nature of life itself. Think of it. How much of what has become meaningful to you has arisen from situations that were completely improbable, never should have happened, or happened for reasons we will never entirely understand.

Call it life’s graciousness, call it grace or call it luck, we learn to be grateful not only for the large ways, but particularly for the many smaller ways that Life has helped and healed and held us when we didn’t even know what was happening.

This week I found myself thinking of my grandmother and grandfather whose relationship and its effect on the family they started is one of those great improbabilities. In the immense world of early Twentieth Century America, they should never should have found each other, let alone have found the courage to marry and raise children, one of whom was my mother.

Some of you have heard me speak of my grandmother just recently. She was one of the first child actresses on the Boston stage. Whenever a play called for a pretty little girl to capture the audience's heart she was there. But we don't know whose home she returned to every night after the performances. Her mother and father separated soon after her birth. Her mother had no interest in raising her, did not care for her and possibly did not even love her.

She had no siblings, and all we do know is that this child who became my grandmother, was passed around between various people called "aunts" and "uncles". She was in nearly every sense an orphan, and I have always believed that her stage presence, her sense of humor and her strong will were qualities she carefully developed simply in order to survive.

At the same time, far away in Canada, my grandfather was twelve when his mother died. His father couldn't cope with raising two sons alone, and so when my grandfather was a young teenager he was sent away from Canada, away from his home, his father and brother, to live with a childless uncle who was a watchmaker in Waltham Ma. As far as we know he never saw his father again. With only a minimum of formal schooling he set about to develop the skills he needed to earn a living.

Somehow these two orphans in the storm met on a trolley car in Boston. It never should have worked out. Neither my grandmother nor grandfather had any positive experience of family life or parenting. They had diametrically opposite personalities. But my grandmother with a gypsy in her soul was looking for a loving, tender man who could be a source of stability in her life. My stable, loving grandfather was apparently looking for a woman with a gypsy in her soul.

It was a wholly improbable relationship, creating a family that nurtured three children, one of whom was my mother, and then my brother and me and my children and my children's children. I don't doubt that the commitment of two orphans to one another, their commitment to love and to family, will go forth in some way to support generations to come. It was an incredibly accidental and creative relationship! What it was that blessed that marriage between these two very damaged young people is something we will never entirely know. But my grandparents were not unique. That's the reason I tell the story.

Many of us have stories like that, which reflect how so much of what has made our lives meaningful happened accidentally or for reasons so mysterious we may spend a life trying to figure them out. Think about the events that influenced your life and be grateful for the fortunate accidents that have brought you to this place in your life.

This morning I am also grateful for things that have been said to me over the years whose effects have gone far beyond what was intended. For example watching our oldest child being born was a deeply moving experience but what

stayed with me most is a remark that was prompted as much by fatigue as by anything else.

Immediately after his birth, when our son was warmed and wrapped up, the nurse turned to me with him in her arms and said, "Would you like to hold him?" I should point out that this was very early in the practice of having fathers in the delivery room, so we were all new to it. At this moment, I had on surgical scrubs but no mask or gloves and my first reaction was to say to the woman offering to hand me our son, "Should I hold him? But what about my germs?" She gave me a look that probably implied, "This is what we get for allowing fathers into delivery rooms" and then she said, "He's going home with you isn't he."

That turned out to be one of the most important lessons of my career as a parent – given to me by someone who was probably tired and cranky and impatient with this very new father. I've seen other new parents worry that they will irreparably harm this fragile new life, their child, but what those words suggested to me was "This child (and every child) has been born with a toughness that resists not only most of our microbes but much of the harm we parents unintentionally inflict.

So, I learned, take the child home, do your best, set the limits, be a parent and trust that you and your child are strong enough to survive and flourish in the relationship. It was unintended wisdom from an overworked delivery room nurse. I give thanks this morning for the unintended guidance I have received along the way. Perhaps you do too.

And this morning I am grateful for the intimate relationships in my life that never ended quite the way I wanted them to. In particular, I am grateful for every girl I ever broke up with or who ever broke up with me. I think it's pretty clear that creation has not endowed any of us with a talent for genuine emotional intimacy. We have to work at it in fits and starts and working at it means learning to tame the raging ego that knows only the pain it feels, but never the pain it inflicts.

Growing up for intimacy means we go through a long process of trial and error. We hurt one another, react, rebound and rebuild the relationship or let it die of boredom – in which case there is hurt inflicted all over again. These are experiences most of us would like to forget and most of the time we probably should forget them but not completely.

Every so often we might take time to be grateful for the people who went down the rapids with us as far as they could go. The lessons we learned from being with them -- from the mistakes we made together and from the wonderful moments as well --are very tender and very personal.

Finally, I want to take a moment to say thanks for every pet I ever owned. When President Clinton got a new dog during his second term in office a reporter asked his press secretary why he had done this. This was during the Monica Lewinski affair when the president had plenty enough problems without taking on any more. As I recall his press secretary responded, "I think the President just wanted to have one person in the family who was happy to see him every time he came home."

Now I've been a dog owner most of my life, and I suspect that what looks to us like unconditional love on the part of our pet may, in fact, be something different. Nonetheless, pets have a way of drawing us out of the tiny knot of self-concern into which we sink too often and drawing us into a larger arena where Life reaches out to us. The lesson our pets offer us every day is that we may feel like, and actually be miserable, heartless wretches to the rest of the world, but at the end of the day there is someone who still believes that we can act like a decent human being. Knowing that, sometimes we try a little harder.

These are the things I am grateful for and I hope I will always remember them: the incredible miracle of relationships that work; the almost accidental nature of some of the guidance we receive; the people who have helped us grow up even through relationships that did not last; the pets who have reminded us of some very fundamental needs for all created beings.

I also love my family and friends, and I am grateful for all of the good fortune that has come into my life, but I take Thanksgiving to be a time to recognize the harder lessons of gratitude for the web of life that nurtures us in ways far beyond our understanding. If we recognize the accidental nature of so many of the gifts we have received, then we understand that giving can go on for the rest of our lives.