

Message: “Celebrate the Good Together”

I’m amazed the Thanksgiving holiday is here. It seems like just a short time ago we were planning summer activities, going to the beach and spending time outdoors. The change of season seems to come more quickly as I get older. I know you feel the same way.

Today is Friendsgiving Sunday. Thank you to all who have come to join us in this more casual, modern gathering. Our hope is for you to see it as a way to celebrate close friendships and “chosen family,” especially if you aren’t with your biological family for the holiday. All are welcome, today and every day.

The first rule of Friendsgiving: there are no rules. We aren’t setting expectations. We hope you have a stress-free time with us. We do encourage a playful attitude and active listening, but that’s up to you.

Sadly, we also know that, along with the joy of family gatherings, comes the potential for disagreement, tension, anxiety and conflict. A few snarky remarks by this person or that, and we can find ourselves embroiled in a heated moment which leaves everyone angry, hurt, frustrated and disappointed.

Even when we have the best of intentions, we can find ourselves caught up in a maelstrom of hurt feelings. I speak from experience. I had a tense encounter this past week. Something simple caused hurt feelings. And I could feel the anxiety building, like a cloud, gathering energy, waiting for something to trigger it.

What can we do? Let me offer a playful, but meaningful illustration. It comes from a YouTube source called Honkology¹.

Consider two geese, goose and another goose. “Goose finds a fact. Solid, verifiable, breadcrumb certified. Goose holds it out to another goose. Another goose flaps, scoffs, calls it fake bread, and honks loudly. Not because another goose hates truth, but because it made them feel exposed, threatened, wrong. And in some ponds, being wrong is worse than being dishonest. There are several things we can learn from this.

¹ Honkology: Why Facts Don’t Change Minds. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Omc37TvHN74>

First, why do facts backfire? Goose thought facts were enough. But brains aren't spreadsheets. They're nests. Messy, layered, emotional. And when you throw a fact into the wrong nest, it doesn't get adopted. It gets set on fire. This is called motivated reasoning. Another goose doesn't weigh information evenly. They defend what makes them feel safe, not what's true, what's familiar.

Also, belief equals identity. Some beliefs are facts, some are armor. Questioning them feels like tearing feathers off your own wings. Because in many ponds, to change your mind is to lose your flock. Another goose doesn't reject the fact because it's wrong. Another goose rejects it because if it's right, they might lose their friends, their family, their entire pond. And that hurts more than a lie.

Then there's the shame, pride and the backfire loop. Another goose isn't evil. Another goose is scared. Because saying, "I was wrong," isn't just hard. It feels humiliating. And shame is a loud honk drowning out reflection. Better to double down than feel small. So, another goose stays convinced, not because it's true, but because it's safer.

Next, we have echo chambers and ponds. Some geese live in information bubbles. Every honk they hear agrees with them. Any breadcrumb that doesn't is called propaganda. With some ponds, we misread things. No problem. The real honk is deeper.

Conspiracies and counter-evidence are seen as proof of how powerful they are. They hide the truth. That's why 'you're showing me this' is politics. Fact check another goose's favorite goose, and suddenly you're the problem. You're biased. You hate our pond. It's not about facts. It's about allegiance, fear and shame.

And information bubbles, they don't build themselves. Algorithms see what riles you up, then serve more of it, spicier, louder and angrier. Because an outraged goose is an engaged goose, and engagement makes a line somewhere go up. So, another goose isn't just stuck. They're being fed the same fear every single day on purpose by a machine that doesn't care about who it hurts.

So, what actually changes minds? Facts help, but only when there's room to hear them. Minds change when another goose feels safe enough to be wrong.

When there's trust. When there's slowness. When questions get asked instead of traps being set. Relationships help. Conversations in-person help. Stories help. Gentle curiosity does what yelling never could.

Final goose wisdom. Goose has learned you can't honk another goose into seeing clearly. You can only show what it looks like to change your own mind and survive because some geese never leave their bubble."

Our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is also a good lesson on what to do when we're in disagreement. There's much we can learn from the lives of those who've gone before us. We read the part where Paul encourages us to celebrate God all day, every day; to revel in God's presence with us.

But this follows a part we didn't read, a disagreement between two loved ones. Paul wrote, *"I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn't want his children holding grudges. And, oh, yes, Syzygus, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them"* (Philippians 4:2-3a).

Paul then offers two pieces of advice. First, he says, *"Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them"* (v4). He's speaking to those who are hurt or those who care for, and want to help, the ones who are in conflict.

It's about hospitality, about welcome, about inclusion, about curiosity. We aren't the judge. We don't point fingers. We don't accuse. We dropped our stones long ago, since Jesus told us only the sinless can throw them. We aren't looking to pick fights or call names.

What we can share is joy. This is the next piece of advice. Share your joy in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. You can hear the implied word "always." Joy is revealed in how we treat those around us, in how we respond to slights against us, and in how we reach out to those who are hurt.

We can show our joy. Joy is found in the knowledge and experience of the presence of God, a nearness that diminishes our anxiety and brings out a willingness to connect with God with gratitude and hope. Joy is found in our spiritual communion with God. Joy comes from peaceful confidence as we live in Christ.

Joy is a gift we can share, no matter how difficult the moment may be. This goes beyond walking on the sunny side of the street or a spoonful of sugar. Joy comes from a deeper place, from within our inner being. Where we seek something more, something... eternal.

This is why gathering in worship and social time is good.

We remember the joy of the Lord in those times. We know God is present then, and it helps us look for the Lord in the difficult moments. We can tap into the same source of love and joy, letting it refill our soul. This has the benefit of reducing our anxiety and stress, of lifting our eyes from our own issues to see the people around us, realizing they're going through the same struggles. And then, when we share our joy, we see their spirit lift as well, their joy.

I know this sounds optimistic. Worry is the kind of thing that returns again and again. You know as well as I do. Empty words don't help against the doubt and heightened sensitivity we feel in those moments.

So, Paul speaks directly to us. Don't worry, says Paul, but get on your knees. Don't worry but pour it out. Don't worry but beg and plead and pound on the doors of heaven, even as you know – not hope, not assume, but know – you're heard and answers are already all around you when you open your eyes again and put one foot in front of the other. Don't worry because you don't have time to worry; you're so busy bending God's divine ear. Don't worry because your life is now a prayer, and the answers come fast and furious and surprising when you listen.

Don't worry because from somewhere comes this sense that maybe, just maybe, you aren't alone. A sense that maybe you do have a place, a home, an identity, an existence right here and right now that's useful, meaningful and life-giving. From somewhere, God, it must be, comes a peace that even on your best days you can't define or describe. It just is, passing our understanding.

For now, choose joy. Rejoice in the Lord, always. We've come back to this. Sometimes we feel like we want to negotiate with Paul. Rejoice in the Lord, when it's convenient. Rejoice in the Lord, when we've got the time. When we're in the mood. When the world hasn't taken yet another swipe at my confidence. Rejoice in the Lord, when I've run out of excuses not to. Rejoice in the Lord, always.

How in the world do we do this? Focus on the next one?

No, focus more deeply on this one. Paul says, “*Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling and gracious - the best, not the worst...*” (v8, MSG).

Implied is the confidence there’s enough good out there in the world to fill us up. There is. God is good. Good not only fills us up but gives us joy. Real joy; in the Lord, always.

Joy is dynamic, a result of an ongoing relationship and way of living keeping us engaged with God and with people. It leaks out as we engage with others. It shapes our language and our vision and our gentleness. Joy shows. In whom we are, in everything we do, in the attitudes we present, in the face we offer to the world, joy shows, always.

Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God.

Let us pray ...

Philippians 4:4-9 (CEB)

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (CEB)

Once you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the Lord your God is giving you, and put it in a basket. Then go to the location the Lord your God selects for his name to reside. Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: “I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.”

The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the Lord your God’s altar. Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God:

“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. So we cried out for help to the Lord, our ancestors’ God. The Lord heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land - land full of milk and honey. So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.”

Set the produce before the Lord your God, bowing down before the Lord your God. Then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done for you and your family - each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.