

Homily: "Sit at the Welcome Table"
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Although I grew up in a family of city-dwellers, we did have one harvest ritual. Once a year, we would climb into our biggest car and drive out to Mr. Kelly's Farm. You could smell the orchard almost a mile away. At a certain turn in the road, if your window was rolled down, the sweet smells of early cider and fresh baked donuts would float into the car. The barn was always packed with customers, who, no matter what their age, all had cinnamon and powdered sugar falling off their chins. After an hour or so of careful shopping, we would leave the barn with our arms loaded with apples, pears, and the last of the peaches.

At home, my mother would start canning, assigning us each to specific tasks. One of us would wash the fruit. The other cut the slices. And my sister and I would fight over who got to turn the applesauce press. It seemed like it took all my strength to turn the handle, when the press was full, and I would become mesmerized watching the small metal strip go round and round and round. After a couple of flurry-filled days, it was over. The jars of canned fruit were carried to the basement, and lined up in their neat rows, to wait until we had need of them. And we would go down and retrieve them on February days, when we just couldn't bear the thought of another steamed green bean or brussel sprout.

Each year, as the autumn wind begins to turn, I remember this harvest ritual, because I don't think I properly appreciated it as a child. To me, then, it was all a grand adventure of donuts, fresh fruit, and the fun of a hot, steamy kitchen. The canning itself was the harvest celebration. It was the time to give thanks for the riches of the orchard that year, to give thanks for the fruit filling every spare counter space in our kitchen, to give thanks for the food filling our stomachs as we cooked away. It was a time to celebrate summer's bounty, and then to move on to holiday preparations and turkeys.

But as I have grown older, I realize that it was not my canning days which taught me to be grateful. For it is easy to be grateful, when you have all that you can possibly imagine wanting. It is easy to be grateful, when you are in the company of friends and loved ones, having a great time. Yet, the real gratitude I learned came months later, when the winter's cold had gotten us down, when the fresh taste of summer was a distant memory, when we were cranky and grumpy from cabin fever. I would carry up one of those golden jars from the basement and remember the laughter of those harvest days, and then the real gratitude would begin.

What is gratitude, really? It is sun-filled fruit, eaten on a winter's day. It is

the warm hand of a kind stranger, when all others have deserted you. It is the moment of laughter on a day filled with serious duties. It is the reconnection found in solitary reflection, after we have trouble recognizing the face in our own bathroom mirror. It is the sheer joy of being alive, even as we realize how quickly the seasons turn.

Gratitude is that ability to still taste of life's blessings, long after the days of our harvest have past. A grateful heart is something to be cultivated, something that we teach one another through the sharing of the seasons and the tables of our lives. We learn to get ourselves a heart of gratitude, and a heart of wisdom, when we celebrate times of plenty, trusting that some small piece of that wealth will still be with us in our times of need. May it always be.