

February 16, 2024

My dear church family,

Many of us remember Lent as a season when we give something up, often candy! Some of you may remember your families or your grandparents giving up meat for the duration of Lent. If so, you found yourself eating lots of fish! I've read that the Eastern Orthodox not only still give up meat, but also eat no fish, no dairy products, and drink no wine nor use olive oil! You can imagine what joy the Easter feast is for those who have fasted in these ways.

More recently, I have heard that Christians have "taken on" practices during Lent rather than giving something up. I was recently reminded of this when I stumbled across this wonderful essay by Anne Lamott. She is a Christian author who lives in Marin County and worships at Marin City Presbyterian Church. If I remember correctly, Pastor Jack arranged for Lamott to speak here at FPCA years ago.

If you or your family are not in the practice of saying Grace before meals, this may be something you would like to start during Lent. The following essay may convince you of your desire to do so. Enjoy!

Pastor Cindy

Counting Our Blessings: Why We Say Grace¹

by ANNE LAMOTT, NOV 28, 2013

No matter how you say it, grace can transform an ordinary meal into a celebration—of family, love, and gratitude.

We didn't say grace at our house when I was growing up because my parents were atheists. I knew even as a little girl that everyone at every table needed blessings and encouragement, but my family didn't ask for it. Instead, my parents raised glasses of wine to the chef: Cheers. Dig in. But I had a terrible secret, which was that I believed in God, a divine presence who heard me when I prayed, who stayed close to me in the dark. So at six years old I began to infiltrate religious families like a spy—Mata Hari in plaid sneakers.

One of my best friends was a Catholic girl. Her boisterous family bowed its collective head and said, "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts. ..." I was so hungry for these words; it was like a cool breeze, a polite thank-you note to God, the silky magnetic energy of gratitude. I still love that line.

I believed that if your family said grace, it meant you were a happy family, all evidence to the contrary. But I saw at certain tables that an improvised grace could cause friction or discomfort. My friend Mark reports that at his big southern childhood Thanksgivings, someone always

¹ <https://parade.com/121696/annelamott/121111-anne-lamott-counting-our-blessings/>

managed to say something that made poor Granny feel half dead. "It would be along the lines of 'And Lord, we are just glad you have seen fit to keep Mama with us for one more year.' We would all strain to see Granny giving him the fisheye."

I noticed some families shortened the pro forma blessing so they could get right to the meal. If there were more males than females, it was a boy chant, said as one word: "GodisgreatGodisgoodletusthankHimforourfoodAmen." I also noticed that grace usually wasn't said if the kids were eating in front of the TV, as if God refused to listen over the sound of it.

And we've all been held hostage by grace sayers who use the opportunity to work the room, like the Church Lady. But more often, people simply say thank you—we understand how far short we must fall, how selfish we can be, how self-righteous, what brats. And yet God has given us this marvelous meal.

It turns out that my two brothers and I all grew up to be middle-aged believers. I've been a member of the same Presbyterian church for 27 years. My older brother became a born-again Christian—but don't ask him to give the blessing, as it can last forever. I adore him, but your food will grow cold. My younger brother is an unconfirmed but freelance Catholic.

So now someone at our holiday tables always ends up saying grace. I think we're in it for the pause, the quiet thanks for love and for our blessings, before the shoveling begins. For a minute, our stations are tuned to a broader, richer radius. We're acknowledging that this food didn't just magically appear: Someone grew it, ground it, bought it, baked it; wow.

We say thank you for the miracle that we have stuck together all these years, in spite of it all; that we have each other's backs, and hilarious companionship. We say thank you for the plentiful and outrageous food: Kathy's lox, Robby's bûche de Noël. We pray to be mindful of the needs of others. We savor these moments out of time, when we are conscious of love's presence, of Someone's great abiding generosity to our dear and motley family, these holy moments of gratitude. And that is grace.

Anne Lamott is the author of [Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers](#).