



Holiday Dinners: Should Politics Be Off the Menu?

By Carolyn Parr

Picture this: An extended family is gathered for a Thanksgiving feast. A granddaughter announces she's moving in with her boyfriend, an undocumented immigrant. A son has brought his same-sex partner to meet the family.

The family vegetarian ostentatiously declines the turkey and anything it touched. Your Mom's friend, who helped make dinner, is 10 years younger than she and you suspect he's more than a "friend." A policeman and a Black Lives Matter activist complete the scene. Is that judgment or wine you're choking on?

Politics can often be synonymous with power and the need to control. A helping of controversial politics can be like pouring vinegar on the pecan pie. When my ego gets over-

identified with my opinions, I not only want to express myself. I want to make others agree. It becomes a power play. I want to win.

The need to be right (and righteous) may spoil more than just a meal. It has the potential to derail family relationships — sometimes forever— quicker than anything else. When someone says, "It's a matter of principle" or starts quoting Scripture, or loudly cuts off others, or resorts to name calling for those who disagree; it's time to shut up and pass the Pepto Bismol.

Of course it's a good thing to seek truth and to act from a moral basis. What's wrong with wanting to be right? And righteous? Nothing, if we have the humility to understand we may be wrong. Or, more realistically,

we may be partly right and partly wrong. The truth is, we are only capable of seeing through the lens of our own limited experience. We need each other's vision to reveal to us what we're missing. We need each other's perspective to enhance our own.

To insist that another (whose values do not mirror your own) is not only wrong, but actually immoral, leads to broken politics, broken families, and historically has even been foundational to war.

Maybe, even before saying grace, notice the diversity at the table and offer some levity. The hostess might say, "Wow! All that's missing is a reporter from the New York Times and one from Fox News! The conversation should be interesting!"

Sometimes a dash of humor might be just the seasoning that is needed. Is conversation among a diverse group even possible or should the family agree not to discuss anything controversial? Is it better to focus on creating and sharing happy memories, perhaps some song and dance after dinner? I would offer that common ground and common values do exist in the midst of so much diversity. We just have to be willing to focus on the big picture. So what can this family talk about? I believe they can talk about anything they want to, if they keep their vision

large enough. They undoubtedly still have many common values. The dinner guests all yearn to give and receive love. They believe in the humane treatment of animals (even if they disagree on eating them). They pray for a safe world in which to bring up children. They all believe in human dignity and respect for human life — that black lives matter and immigrants' lives matter and police officers' lives matter. But in their own various experiences they see these values being violated, and they most likely disagree on what to do about it.

With this vision of offering a bigger picture, what if the hostess invites her guests to name and reframe the values they see represented at the table? She might ask the family to offer suggestions, imagining a collaboration of solutions. We have witnessed this happen nationally where teens have led efforts to make schools safer and still honor the Second Amendment. There are many ways to express values. Some are represented at the table; others have yet to be dreamt. So much more is possible when the bigger picture is embraced.



Rumi, a 12th century Persian poet, said it this way:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and rightdoing
There is a field.*

I will meet you there.

What does Rumi's field look like for your family? It might be a serious exchange of ideas, focusing on that bigger picture. Or it may need to be the place where politics are taken off the menu for now, and instead, break out the family albums, turn on the music, and just dance. Or maybe it will be a bit of both.

Happy family gatherings!



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