

THANKSGIVING WITH LOVE

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Last Spring Kathy Kipp and I taught “Easy Cooking Lessons” to our then “Junior Highers” on Wednesday afternoons. Each week Kathy and I would prep the kitchen and work side by side getting our lessons ready. While we prepped, Kathy would always ask me how my day was going, as she knew that every Wednesday I would drive up to Yorba Linda and pick my Mom up from my Sister’s home and take her to lunch. You see, I have lost most communication with my Mom due to Alzheimer’s disease. Just as some of you have lost and are losing this battle with one of your loved ones today. One afternoon I was reminding my Mom that I see her every Wednesday and we go out to lunch just like we were doing at that moment. She responded that Wednesdays are her Best Day! Because she gets to be with me. I held her hand and embraced her with love the best I could do before she forgot what she had just said. That Wednesday afternoon was the longest vocal conversation that she has been able to express.

Where am I taking you with noncommunication? To all of you, our Faith Family. Kathy heard my story while we were prepping that day, and she embraced me with compassion and love while I burst out into tears as I started realizing my Mother’s declining health. It was a Faith Family member who took time out every Wednesday to really listen to me and embrace me with kindness, love and support.

This Fall we invited Dr. Eric Elnes to speak before us on his new book, *GIFTS OF THE DARK WOOD – SEVEN BLESSINGS FOR SOULFUL SKEPTICS (AND OTHER WANDERERS)*. He writes about his prayerful times when feeling bewildered while struggling with different life issues.

Today I speak of my own Dark Wood experience. But before I do, I have to start at the beginning, four years ago this Fall.

It was covenant season and I was trying to discern where God wanted me to serve in the upcoming year. I had been teaching for years but felt that there was something new in store for me. As I was driving down MacArthur Boulevard towards our Church on a Sunday morning, I was literally hit on the forehead by the Holy Spirit saying, “Deacon, Deacon, Deacon.” “What is a Deacon?” I asked out loud and started laughing. I questioned this thought, and each time

the Holy Spirit came back and said “Deacon!” So I got our Bylaws out and read what a Deacon meant and its duties:

Deacons. The Diaconate in cooperation with the Minister(s) shall have responsibility for the spiritual life of the Church, and for the nurture of those within the Congregation. Its duties shall include:

- a. Provision for the worship services of the Church, including care for the altar, preparation of the Communion Table, assistance in the celebration of Holy Communion and Baptism, provision for pulpit supply, greeting and ushering.
- b. Devising and maintaining structures for the care and visitation of the members of the Church, giving special attention to those with identifiable needs.
- c. Developing and maintaining ways of integrating new and existing members into the life and mission of the Church, with particular care and concern during the first years of membership.
- d. The Diaconate shall be responsible for programs which nurture the women of the Church.
- e. The Diaconate shall be responsible for programs which nurture the men of the Church.

I read and reread these Bylaws and was still puzzled, but every time I thought about Deacons, the Holy Spirit kept saying “Yes, Leslie – Deacons!!!”

So I covenanted to serve on the Deacon Committee, thus starting my journey. At that time, I questioned what the Committee was doing. There were so many events scheduled, with no one signing up or showing up at times. I took time for deep prayer and quiet time for the Holy Spirit to guide me. I heard the Spirit say, “Slow down – make things simpler, more meaningful.” My first task was to get to know more members of our Church. I heard many stories, many struggles and much passion for our Congregation. At the end of the year, our little group appointed me as Head Deacon. I wanted to have a partner to help exchange ideas with me. This is when Lucy Mercer and I began our journey together. In the spirit of Congregationalism,

we listened and worked really hard to hear what the Spirit was calling our Congregation to do. My prayer time became deeper each day, and I continued to hear “Simplify!” The Spirit was telling me to slow down, pray, read scripture and support our Faith Family.

Now here’s the amazing part. Out of my frustration and not being able to help our Congregation on my own, I started relying on the Holy Spirit to get me through this journey. I felt called to do some things that were really scary, yet I felt peace and calm. I never doubted my authority from GOD. I was hearing it Loud and Clear.

The Holy Spirit was encouraging and leading us toward a new positive direction. In my head I was a small voice, yet I trusted GOD completely every day entering the Dark Wood. I could feel the Spirit’s strength and love. With drive and determination, I didn’t look back! I never questioned this decision – never questioned “What if?” I saw an ending so beautiful and spiritual that I knew I was being supported 100 percent by my Lord.

At that time I don’t think you all would have looked at me twice for leadership, guidance or support. So I didn’t tell anyone else or speak out at our huge meeting when Chip resigned. It was an ugly mess, I will agree to that. But sometimes we have to go through the Dark Woods to have the Spirit move us so we can all grow. There were many members hearing the Spirit’s direction – hearing the promise of the 23rd Psalm: *“Even were I to walk through a valley of deepest darkness I should fear no harm, for you are with me.”*

Today I do feel the Holy Spirit with our Faith Family.

Dr. Eric Elnes states: “You and I are not alone here. The world we inhabit is not just earth and sky, plants and animals. Funny things happen that add up to more. Every great religion has been formed and continued by those who have discovered it and wanted to know more. Most of us focus instead on life’s practicalities: getting good grades, finding a good job, earning money to meet the next rent or mortgage payment, and using what’s left over to provide safety and comfort for ourselves and those we care about. But this is not all your life is about. There is a realm of Spirit that Jesus called the Kingdom of God that intersects our worlds – or some say, infuses it. If this is true, it is the most exciting and most meaningful thing of all. If there is no contact with the Holy Spirit, all religion is a sham. But if there is contact, it is the most important thing you will ever do.”

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These past four years have been a huge journey for me as well as for this Church. I pray we have grown and become more faithful through the love, compassion and gratitude of our Faith Family.

Eric talks about the importance of getting quiet and making time each day to pray, opening our will to the Spirit each day.

You all have become my Faith Family. I have taught many of your children throughout the years. I have engaged in friendships beyond just attending Church on Sundays. Whenever I start my route to Church down MacArthur toward Heliotrope, I feel a warm swell coming over me. My mouth turns up on both sides and I become overjoyed by your love. My friendships have blossomed. My devotion to caring has risen. I try to help where I can be of best service to my Lord.

Community Church is not just a quaint beautiful “New England” building nestled in Corona del Mar. Community Church is my Faith Family. Is it yours?

As you journey into this Thanksgiving season of family togetherness, may you also find the love of your Faith Family. As the holiday season speeds up, I encourage you to take some time to slow down for prayer and the Holy Spirit, trusting that God has a great plan for you.

Look around you today. Who are the people you go to for support and encouragement? Who do *you* support and encourage? Who are your Faith Family members?

“There is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friend.” (John 15:13)