

Empty Chair

By Justin J. Agolia

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Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. I've forced myself to not face this day until now. With the months following the death of my father and the days feeling long and numb, I couldn't bare to think about the holidays. However, I must face this day and I've chosen to be alone, to somehow gather my fractured thoughts, and reflect a little on past Thanksgivings and the one we will partake in tomorrow.

For the past 12 years, the Thanksgiving holiday has become one of the highlights of the year for us. It was a time when the five of us sat down together for a very special, homemade meal and simply enjoyed one another's company.

In 1991 the weekend after Thanksgiving, we almost lost my mother in a terrible car accident. Every year following that incident, our Thanksgivings have always had more meaning for us and we definitely had so much to be thankful for especially since Mom could be with us. That same event always came up in conversations the following Thanksgiving meals.

I'd have to admit, we weren't the traditional Thanksgiving family where Mom would do all the cooking and all the men sat around watching the holiday, football game. On the contrary, dad would get up about 4:30 a.m. to place the turkey in the oven, allowing it to slowly cook the entire day at a very low temperature.

Throughout the day mom and dad shared the cooking responsibilities. Although we helped out in some of the dinner preparations, it was mom and dad who did most of the work. About 3 p.m., Kristian, Tad, and I would go outside and chop some wood for an evening fire. Kole, our family dog, would

run around watching us split wood in the backyard. When I say it was a family day, it was just us, nothing more, nothing missing.

About 4:30 p.m., mom or dad would call us in for dinner. The three of us couldn't wait to share in what we felt was the best meal of the year. My parents made almost everything from scratch: homemade stuffing, mashed potatoes, yams, and many other wonderful additions. There was nothing that could top this off.

One of the many traditions we did as a family was share something we were thankful for after we said grace. For me, it was a very intimate time because I always felt I had been blessed more than I truly deserved. Just being home with my family - after being away for most of the year - always touched my heart. To come home to two special parents and see my two younger brothers, how could I not be grateful? And since my trip back to NY during the holiday season often took anywhere from 8-10 hours, I had plenty of time to reflect upon what I had to be thankful for.

This year is quite different. There wasn't any long trip home from Virginia to reflect upon; there isn't that same excitement that we once had; and there won't be any homemade turkey, no stuffing, no firewood, no times of sharing around the dinner table, and there won't be any smiles on our faces, at least this year.

As I pass the kitchen table, I also recognize something else that will never be the same - the empty chair. It's the chair my father used to sit in at the head of the table.

There is something deep within me that longs to sit down at the table with my mother, my two brothers, and my father. I yearn to turn my head to the left and see my father's countenance filled with joy and, then turn to the right, to see

my mother's wonderful smile over the fact that we were all home again. We all had joy on our faces then.

Now, I pass that chair my father once sat in. It was the chair from where we heard him share his heart, his passions, where he expressed his dreams and his concerns with us, where he spoke words of reproof, as well as words of encouragement. The words that fell off His lips and into our hearts were many. Yet, there was one other thing that came from my father's mouth: it was his heart of gratitude to the Lord.

Although this empty chair brings pain, I can look at that seat as a place where I not only heard gratefulness from my father's mouth, but, more significantly, where I learned to be more than grateful for what I had been blessed with, especially the family I was born into. That alone causes me to see that I have been richly blessed.

As today closes and as I begin to bring my thoughts to a close, I wish I could see my father in that chair, once again, and hear him speak. I know that won't happen; it's just a wish. Now he is gone. He won't be home this Thanksgiving, nor will he share in future ones. And I won't be able to admire him in person as I once did.

But what is it about that chair that speaks to me? Perhaps it's found in this: *that his leaving will open opportunities for many good beginnings.*

It's hard to see many things clearly these days, but perhaps I can get a glimpse of this mystery and begin to sense the presence of Christ in all of this confusion.

Possibly that chair is to be filled by another, and maybe the emptiness I sense from looking at that seat is also the same emptiness I carry deep within my heart. There is One who knew emptiness so well as he emptied his entire life

so that I may experience a completeness amidst my own brokenness. I long for Him to heal and make what appears to be bad, good.

If that is possible - which I feel it is - then, perhaps I can begin to see that place of emptiness as the space where real healing and love can be experienced - where those who were once rejected can now experience true acceptance; those once betrayed can now feel loved; and those wounded can now sense the healing presence of the One who felt complete rejection, betrayal, and hurt. Even in these darkest times, I pray I may still turn my head and see Christ in the eyes of others.

Thought:

I am one of those people who needs to sit on that seat and feel that touch of Christ. I'm not sure I've ever felt it before, but even in my brokenness, may God use this ragamuffin to reach out and see others more differently than I've seen them before.