

RIGHT or WRONG? Hosting Thanksgiving

November 20, 2009

My mother-in-law died two weeks ago. Her children typically met at her house for Thanksgiving. Still grieving, the siblings are unable to plan the holiday. As the oldest daughter-in-law, I am going to offer our home as the gathering place. I think I can help them during this time. Does this sound intrusive?

The level of intrusiveness could be determined by your position of credibility in this family. So, something of a litmus test may be forthcoming!

But your obvious sense of care for the whole family indicates you are a closely held member of this grieving family. Further, you understand grief's impact can be severe during this time of the year. Longstanding traditions are patterns of order for us. But with deaths, reference points—particularly emotional and moral ones—seem either to disappear or move far to the margins of our sensitivities. We can feel disoriented and distraught. Much of life can get off track.

So, your invitation can be evidence of your care for the family well-being. You can offer the invitation with the suggestion that you know your home is not their mother's place, but the family can gather in her memory. Perhaps you can recommend they bring their version of their mother's special dishes. Quite possibly, someone may reject that idea—that to try to recreate their mother's recipe would not be their wish. So, you can ask for suggestions of what they would like to bring or provide the option of simply "bringing" themselves, for that may be the most important gift for everyone.

As you actually gather, perhaps your husband or one of the others can lead a time of prayer for the meal, for the life of their mother, and for the blessings of God that might be even more apparent through the filters of losing a parent. Depending upon the group, perhaps some suggestions can be made of talking about their mother's particular life traits that were important and for which they are grateful.

But I've learned to tread carefully regarding any suggestions to a family coming so closely to a death in the family. Even the most well-thought-out and appropriate suggestions can be taken wrongly. This is a time for you to practice your sense of grace and well-being toward others who are hurting. You know the gathering is for them primarily, not for you. Here is an opportunity to put others first. Some will catch your gift; others may not.

Thanksgiving truly is an American holiday, and essentially a secular one at that. However, the holiday may lend itself to the celebration of Christian faith practiced more than any of the other holidays we observe. The virtue of offering thanksgiving to God and others for the life we have is woefully under-applied. Your gathering could provide opportunity for such to be done.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.