

Chopped ~ Thanksgiving Edition
Jeremiah 29:11-13 & Philippians 4:11b-13
Rev. Jo Ramsey ~ November 25, 2018

[1 dinner] Show of hands---who had a good thanksgiving? Was your dinner delicious? Complete with all the fixins'? The turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, yams, crescent rolls, pumpkin pie---traditional favorites, seasonal treats, and maybe even a new recipe? I hope so! I hope your family got along ok and no one argued over politics at the dinner table.

[2 food] If you think about it---Thanksgiving is really all about the dinner table. Most holidays involve food, but they have other major activities too. With Christmas, you have Santa's visit, the exchanging of gifts and of course, the birth of Baby Jesus. With Halloween, you have costumes, candy and trick or treating. With Easter, you have the Easter Bunny, colored eggs, and most important, the resurrection of Jesus. Even the Fourth of July, while it involves a picnic, usually includes fireworks and sparklers. Thanksgiving pretty much boils down to eating.

[3 logo] So today, in honor of the Thanksgiving feast, we're going to think about food – specifically, the Food Network T.V. show, Chopped. As I told the children, Chopped is a cooking competition show. The basic premise involves four chefs who compete to prepare dinner for a panel of three judges. **[4 ready]** The game includes three rounds – appetizer, entrée and dessert. Each chef has between 20 and 25 minutes to prepare and serve their offering. **[5 looking in]** The catch? The competitors must use all four mystery ingredients provided in a basket at the beginning of each round. They all receive the same four items.

[6 cover] It might be orange juice, turnips, duck fat and fruit gummies, or veal, perogies, beans and pepper pot soup. You never know. The chefs must compose a dish using all four items. They don't all have to be used in the same thing, but they must be incorporated, and whatever is prepared should fit that particular course. **[7**

pantry] Chefs have access to a pantry, spices, and an extensive supply of cooking equipment like a fryer, blast chiller, and ice cream maker. A variety of dishware, bowls and cups are made available for plating.

[8 judging] At the end of each round, the contestants present their dish to the judges. Usually, they say something like, "What I have prepared for you today is..." The judges study, sample, and critique the food, at times asking questions of the chefs. Several factors play into the judging process—taste, presentation, preparation, use of the pantry, creativity, if the plate is cohesive, and perhaps, most importantly, if the items have been "transformed."

[9 Ted] After a brief break, the contestants return to the kitchen, and host Ted Allen says, "Whose dish is on the chopping block?" as he rests his hand on a metal cloche. Then, Allen lifts the cover with great flourish, and a plate is revealed. Whoever's plate is on the chopping block has been chopped. The judges explain briefly why the meal didn't cut it, and then the chef departs, leaving one less competitor in the next round.

[10 winner] In the end, only one chef wins the competition. They receive \$10,000, a coveted Chopped Chef Jacket and the prestigious title of "Chopped Champion!"

[11 YG] We recently held a Chopped competition at Youth Group—with our youth competing in 3 teams for a panel of celebrity judges. **[12 EU judges]** Our kids did an amazing job of using their mystery basket items to create unique dishes...

[13 kids presenting] Some of our mystery basket ingredients were blood orange gingerbread soda, crescent roll dough, cooked bacon, and FrankenBerry cereal.

[14 first thanksgiving] The first thanksgiving was kind of like Chopped... The pilgrims and Native Americans couldn't go to a grocery store and just pick out what they needed to make their dishes. They used what they had, what they could find--venison, lobster, berries, corn, fish, turkey, squash---and they created the first Thanksgiving meal to celebrate the blessings of friendship, hard work and survival.

[15 unique] Our lives work the same way... We are given mystery basket full of ingredients and we're challenged to make a meal. That meal is our lives. We don't get to choose what's in our baskets. Like the chefs on the show, each of us are given a unique set of talents, gifts, circumstances, trials and struggles in life. It is our responsibility to create a life for ourselves, to make a satisfying meal.

[16 paralyzed] Sometimes, we might look at what we have been given and think there is nothing we could possibly do with it. We can't see anything redeeming about a circumstance we face or a quality we have. Some of us become paralyzed. We find ourselves just staring into our baskets, going over and over what we've been through. We let our past define us and never move on.

[17 jealous] Other times, we look at what others have been given and wish we'd received what they'd been given. Sometimes it seems like certain people have it better. They get easier ingredients to work with---things that taste good and go together. Good looks, enough money, good health, athletic ability, a loving family. And we get the opposite...health issues, job loss, addiction, an abusive parent or a sick child. It doesn't seem fair---and it isn't. We can be tempted to feel sorry for ourselves---and jealous too.

[18 hurry] The chefs on Chopped don't have time to linger over the baskets. There's no time to fret, obsess or feel sorry for themselves. They just have to get on with it! Sometimes, they have a vision of the whole dish right from the beginning, but usually they just jump in and start preparing something with one or two of the ingredients. They pray an idea will come to them about that one strange item. We can do the same!

In order to succeed, the competitors must make good use of the pantry. On the show, the kitchen is full of items that complement, sweeten, soften, enrich and enhance the basket items. Things like cream, butter, fruit, lettuce, chocolate and vinegar. **[19 recipe]** The pantry we have includes the same kinds of things...friendship to help us bear our hurts, prayer and worship to lift our spirits, meaningful work and service, support and love from our families, a caring pastor, teacher, therapist or coach, fulfilling hobbies. Thank God for the pantry!

[20 chefs] On Chopped, it is the chef's themselves—their experience, talent, creativity, courage and the ability to think quickly that help them transform the ingredients they receive into appetizer, entrée and dessert. Thankfully, we don't have to rely solely on ourselves! **[21 wave]** We have a greater power at work in us! We don't have to transform our lives by sheer will power. We can rely on God's

grace. Yes, it takes hard work on our part, but it's God's grace at work within and around us that makes our lives into something amazing. God's Holy Spirit, blending, mixing, and creating a satisfying, nourishing, life, one that bears witness to God's love and faithfulness.

[22 jeremiah] As we read in Jeremiah, God has a plan and purpose for us. God wants good things for us. He intends a future filled with hope. He wants to partner with us in the unfolding of our lives.

Sometimes, the "ingredients" we face really are a mystery. We don't understand why or what to do. **[23 joyful]** But we know God calls us to give thanks no matter what. The Philippians passage we read earlier says, "I have learned to be content, In any and in all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and or going hungry, of have plenty and of being in need." A thankful heart is not based on our circumstances, but on God's goodness. We don't have to be thankful FOR all circumstances, just IN them. **[24 strength]** Paul reminds us how to do this, how HE does it. He writes, "For I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It is God who gives us peace, hope and strength as we work with the challenges and blessings in our lives.

A few weeks ago the members of the Tree of Life Synagogue faced a horrible, terrifying massacre. **[25 rabbi]** I was struck by something Rabbi Jeffery Myers said as he spoke with a reporter a week or so later. She asked him, "Why do you think God let this happen?" He answered, "I don't believe God lets this stuff happen. Humans have a choice. And this person made a choice. To me, God is the one I turn to when I have no strength, to say, God give me strength to get through this...and that's what I do every moment of every day. I ask, 'God, Give me strength...and somehow, God does.'"

[26 grace] That is grace, God's grace, giving us strength to cope with whatever we find in our baskets, no matter how hard. Grace at work, countering those forces that work to despair, divide, distract or devastate us. Grace, moving within us to set us free, to heal us, to empower us. **[27 table grace]** Grace, like the prayer we said before our Thanksgiving meal, the way we treat one another, the

way in which we move through the world, the way in which we use our gifts to lift up others. **[28 mystery]** Anne Lamott once wrote, "I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us." Grace transforms us.

[29 basket] As you put away your cornucopia, and get out your Christmas decorations, I invite you to take stock...What are some of the ingredients God has put in your basket? Think about your gifts and talents, but also about the trials and struggles you've faced. What choices or situations have defined your life?

[30 my life] Then, ask yourself...What do I want my life to be, to look like, to taste like? What good future does God want for me, and how can I make that happen? How can I take what God and life have given me, and create a satisfying and beautiful life?

[31 wordle] And finally, what's in your pantry? What resources has God provided that could help you overcome your hardships and use the gifts God have been given? What do you need to add to soften something bitter? What opportunity might allow you to use your gifts in a new way? We hope East Union can be part of your pantry!

[32 before God] Because one day, we will stand before God, and perhaps a few other celebrity judges seated at the pearly gates. And we will offer the feast of our lives to God, with its tasty morsels and unsavory scraps, and say "What I have prepared for you is..." And God will look at us and love us, as he always has. And St. Peter will ask, just like the Chopped Host Ted Allen, "Whose plate is on the chopping block?" And we will stare at his hand on the metal cloche, ready to see our plate revealed. **[33 cross]** But we will find, when the lid is lifted, no plate is on the chopping block! Through God's grace in Christ, we are all Chopped Champions!

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!