

Two grandmothers

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



Attribution [Some rights reserved](#) by [Pacopus](#)

When I was a boy I spent a lot of time with my grandmothers. One was a city grandmother who maintained a small but elegant Victorian home. The other was a country grandma who still lived on the family farm.

Although both were getting by on Social Security and what their husbands had set aside, their experience during the Great Depression had left them with the nagging fear that they could still lose everything. They responded to this anxiety in dramatically different ways.

My brother and I stayed with these women during our childhood summers, and we were formed by their different understandings of how to live in a volatile world. These differences became clear when we were called to the table for dinner.

The city grandmother always served dinner at a dining room table covered in a yellowed lace cloth. Her chipped china was carefully placed around small but polished silver candlesticks. There were always more forks than I could figure out how to use. She taught me that I should put the linen napkin in my lap immediately, that I should always stand if a lady approaches the table, and that it was impolite to reach. She made sure that there was classical music playing on the stereo built into a massive wood cabinet.

Eating at her table was a chore. I don't remember any conversations from those dinners. I remember being dressed up, speaking in soft tones if at all, and being terrified of spilling my juice on that lace tablecloth.

By contrast, my country grandma served her meals in the kitchen since she didn't have a dining room. Her table was always covered with a red and white checked vinyl cloth that took a spill pretty well. There was only one fork per person and if it fell on the floor you picked it up and wiped it off with a paper napkin—you had to be fast because there was a dog named Brownie who was always nearby. We used a strange assortment of plastic glasses that were decorated with names like John Deere or the Red Moon Pizzeria. You never knew who would be at that table. If a neighbor or even a salesman stopped by near dinnertime, Grandma would insist that he or she stay for dinner.

The conversations at her table were often boisterous, and there were often several going on at the same time. But anytime Grandma started to tell a story, everyone would listen. When she got to the funny part of her story she would laugh so hard that she'd slap the table as she coughed, and tears would roll down her cheeks.

Both women were responding to their anxieties. One chose to rise above them by insisting on elegance and by refusing to allow her fears to reduce her character. The other chose to respond to each day with laughter and joy. Both seemed to know that they could choose how to respond to their fears.

As a pastor who frequently stands behind the Table of the Lord, I often think about these two influential women.

My city grandmother would be impressed with how carefully members of the congregation prepare the communion table, with its beautiful cloth and our finest silver. The music is classical. Everyone is dressed up and speaking in hushed tones. We stand and sit at the correct times. The last thing any pastor wants to do is spill the juice on the tablecloth.

Our theology of this sacrament, however, is more about the lessons I learned from my country grandma's table. The eucharistic feast is all about joy. If you make a mistake or commit a sin, well, that is why we have the sacrament of grace. Strangers are always welcome. Jesus is so excited to have us all there, in communion with him, that I can almost see him slapping the table out of sheer delight. Surely the tears of joy roll down.

Still, I am not about to suggest to our worship committee that we get rid of the lace cloth and begin using a red and white vinyl cloth, or that we replace the polished silver with plastic vessels.

I suppose this is because the city grandmother was also trying to teach me something I don't want to forget. She wanted me to learn how to be elegant. In my middle age I think that this too is a means of grace. We could certainly use more elegance and civility in our current debates. Receiving grace should make us gracious, and that's missing in our struggles within churches, families and the nation. There's holiness in being careful, just as there is in laughter and living with abandoned trust.

We still live in a time of great anxiety. When I serve communion I see these two grandmothers, now leaning over the balcony of heaven, encouraging us with their different counsel for modest elegance or sheer delight. The sacrament calls for both.