

Who Knew?

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Jesus spoke in parables to stir the imagination about the kingdom of God on earth... what it looks like.... This is what I'm wondering... whether the Kingdom of God is like a church chili cook off... or a potluck.

There, in the middle of a country, in the middle of a city, in the non-descript basement of a church, are people mulling about, tasting chili, sitting at a table, sharing a meal with strangers, laughing, focusing on the chili-- which is the best chili--and not on one another's job, or class, or education level... Nothing spectacular happens in that place and time, no dramatic teaching or healing or exorcism, no play or performance or concert, nothing spectacular and yet now we know, some two years later, that it was, in fact, utterly spectacular.

Oh, Community and Belonging team at Mayflower, who knew that your ministry team is actually the Kingdom-of-God-on-earth-team, at the very heart of our life as a church? The kitchen as important as the altar. Who knew? Those Gathering Sunday picnics in the parking lot, Consecration Sunday donuts and fruit compote, Mystery dinners, Christmas eve Soup Suppers, Mardi Gras Pancake Breakfast, Easter breakfast, Spring-into-summer lunch, Chili cook off, and more!! Now we know! We miss it so! Or maybe we're even beyond missing it, kind of Covid numb, disbelieving that it will ever happen again... Do we even hunger for God anymore and God's kingdom on earth? Yes!! And now we know! That Chili Cook Off, January of 2022! That it was a foretaste, the inbreaking of the kingdom of God, just being together like that, that sense of wellbeing together, community and belonging and mercy and fulfillment and ultimate goodness... Not spectacular? By God, absolutely spectacular!!

These last two years have been brutal in so many ways. There is little value in these two years plus exile from our lives, from our church, exile from the kitchen and dining room. I guess one could say we don't take it for granted any more. These meals together. These kingdom banquets. And, we've been given more time to reflect, to reckon, to learn, to become more aware of how to be even more welcoming of ourselves and others... This Lent we've had two books, one in each hand, the Bible, and this one, (Jodi Pfar's) and our minds are growing in awareness... So, when we return from exile, we will deepen our collective feeling of community and belonging. We'll take that chili cook off and keep going in the wonderful direction it leads us into that kingdom of God living...not just one evening... but all the time....

Leading up to our Bible story today are numerous stories in Luke of Jesus telling parables. What is the KOG like? Jesus doesn't lay out a template with quantifiable outcomes or metrics. Rather he tells a parable, leaving lots of room for our imagination and our creation. It's like a mustard seed, it's like yeast, it's like a great banquet....

And little more context for today's bible story... Where is Jesus when he tells the parable of the great banquet? Jesus is eating at a lead Pharisee's house. To many this would have been a really big deal. A house on Lake Minnetonka. He's at the dinner party and he looks around and becomes so aware of where people are sitting. Now he's known all his life about how highly stratified his little world is, the social map was bred in his bones, and this is all played out so vividly at the table-- those roles of domination, submission, debt, obligation, power, powerlessness... In this moment he becomes piercingly aware of this, the places at the table, who sits where and with whom. And he knows in his heart, he knows with a knowing beyond knowing, that this is not God's way. What does he do? Rather than literally turning over the tables at that meal, he turns over the tables in their minds, he messes with their minds, he transforms their minds. He says: "you say you are hungry for God but you gotta follow the recipe of God. When you're invited to a banquet, go and sit in the lowest place. When you give a banquet, don't just invite your friends, or those who will somehow return the favor, they may be too busy with their own "important" business anyway... Rather, invite guests from different social circles, go to other neighborhoods... Better yet, go into the streets and the lanes and invite the poor. Even go outside the walls of the city. Cross every boundary ... And invite the outsider. IN." God didn't make these boundaries of gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, religion, sexual preference, gender identity, social status. That's a human made map. Tip those triangles over. Invite everyone to the banquet. And just be together. It's not charity mind you. No one is a "project". Everyone is equal. Just feast on the food and the community! You gotta follow the recipe of God, the foretaste of what is to come on earth, where none are left behind and all have a place of honor. God's banquette etiquette, not Emily Post's!

And we all know that changing dining habits is quite literally to change the world. Remember those lunch counter sit ins in 1960?

When we return from exile to our first, let's say, potluck dinner in our church basement dining room, how will we have changed? What might be different? How might the reckoning of the last two years affect how we are together at table?

Let's imagine....

We'll sit at round tables, everyone choosing for themselves where to sit. This isn't new but it's important. There will be space, not six feet between to stay alive, but a different kind of spaciousness, so we can all fully live. When people cross the threshold into that banquet hall aka church basement dining room, no one will feel compelled to leave parts of themselves outside. Everyone will keep their invisible blanket of life on them, each thread representing something different about us. Everyone will wear the clothes they love and let their hair be the way it is on vacation, their true self. And people will not feel the need to code switch: informal English and other languages fully belong in this kingdom banquet.

We will notice differences after two years plus, children taller and some older people with more disability, mental or physical. But no one will feel the need to hide. We'll just be who we are. We won't ask the questions of our neighbor at the table, that quickly establishes one another's place on the social map, like, "what do you do for a living?" But instead, we'll ask: "What dish did you bring to this kingdom banquet? Is there a story behind it?" Or the best question of all: "So, What's good in your life right now?"

And we'll pray together... What will the prayer be? All good prayers remind us of the deepest truths and of our deepest needs and of our place in the universe.... Will the prayer be? *We are grateful, grateful, grateful for the food, for the wheat, the soil and the sun, the workers who harvest, and for this community, right here, right now. We are all your guests oh God. You are the only host. Amen.*

I am just about done with this morning's sermon. But I have two endings and I can't decide between them. I'll give you both and you can choose the ending you want....

Remember the story of Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector? Jesus saw him in the crowd and said "Zacchaeus, let me come to your house for dinner. Let me be your guest." Jesus was always turning tables,... was he the guest or the host?; and Zacchaeus was so moved by this meal with Jesus that he gave away most of his wealth. Let's imagine, shall we? That one of our nation's 700 billionaires (since the pandemic more billionaires than ever, if you don't have good math skills, I strongly suggest that you think hard about what a billion is... it's many millions, in fact it's a thousand millions...) So, this billionaire is present at the kingdom banquet, aka church basement potluck dinner, and no one is aware of his wealth. Remember we're not fixating on social hierarchies. And he is just so happy to be part of this; and he is so moved, and kinda shaken up, and transformed really by this kingdom of God experience that he begins talking to the person sitting to next to him about the news, how the president wants to tax billionaires, and he says (thinking to himself I can give away all of my millions to this campaign but one, that means, 999 million...) he says that he wants to do everything he can to get that bill passed to

tax billionaires big. The person next to him, who happens to be a faith-based community organizer, smiles and says, not knowing who she's talking to, she says "I'll call you tomorrow to plug you into the organizing but for now let's just be here together with everyone. **This** is what it's all about!!!"

So that's one ending...

Now the other ending....

A four-generation family brings four generations of dishes to the kingdom dinner aka church basement potluck supper. Each generation brings their most comforting, comfort food-- the youngest big, soft chocolate chip cookies of course! When the grandmother/great grandmother takes her food out of her ancient well-worn homemade hotdish cover, the younger generations look aghast, and the youngest blurts out "Yuck! That's disgusting!" It's a big bowl of oatmeal and three toppings, raisins, brown sugar, *and bacon grease*. Just then another 90 something elder, comes up and a big heartwarming smile crosses his face. He hasn't seen this food for years, and it brings back memories of living in deepest poverty when he was young, and how this was the most reliable and best stick to the ribs food they had. He understood completely this comfort food. And the younger generations were made aware of something important that they had never known about their grandmother and her life experience and who she was.

Oh, those potluck dinners. Different foods. Different lives. All belong at the kingdom banquet table!!

Bring two books, Jodi's and the hotdish cover....