



“Home Cooking”

Ezekiel 34:11-16 and Matthew 25:34-40

Al Bunis

June 5, 2011

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

As you might guess...today...I'm planning to spend a lot of this sermon...reflecting on confirmation...and talking to the Confirmands.

But since the confirmation process is about church membership...and about being part of the church...I certainly also mean to include us all in this conversation.

Now...because confirmation leads up to joining the church...I think it's fair to say that...our process this year...and probably in most years...was somewhat of a sales pitch...for the church.

While...of course...Julia and I had other goals as well...we did aim to convince you all...to join the church.

Our pitch involved...a number of initiatives. To begin with we sought to create a sense of community...to create a “church within the church.”

One way we did this was most basic...we tried to get to know each other.

We also broadened out our community to include some adult church members...like Rebecca...and Jimmy...and his side-kick, Jackson!! And we also had our college age helpers...Eric and Gregory...who I refer to as my “private security force.” And...of course...we can't forget Frosty.

The focal point of our sales pitch...was to help you get to know Christ...to see Christ as the countercultural figure...that he was...as opposed to a distorted and somewhat bland vision of Christ...that we so often see in public culture.

We tried to talk about this radical Christ...who not coincidentally...we thought just might appeal to you.

And...our pitch also included showing you...what the church is capable of doing...both in us...and in the world. We saw how the church...this church...and the church more generally...can be a place of...on the one hand...comfort and personal faith....and on the other hand...a place for stepping out and helping those in need.

And then...last...but not least...there was one more crucial ingredient to our sales pitch: food.

Every time we met...literally every time...we shared a group meal. And...broadening the definition of food...we also had our failsafe...secret weapon...the surest way to a teenager's heart...and mind...candy. What a terrific teaching aid.

And so yes...food was integral to the pitch. We used food...which has been...the social glue for almost every culture throughout history...and especially...for Christian culture...we used food to help bring us all together.

During this year long pitch...er...I mean...process...by my back of the envelope calculation...you also spent...about 15-20 hours listening to my...well...let's just call them...my lectures.

Hopefully...this morning...you won't mind another 15 minutes.

I have three things I want to say to you today...really to everyone.

First...I want to say more about...our church home.

So much of the Old Testament is about the Israelites being...away from home. Most famously...the Exodus was 40 years of wandering in the desert...without a home.

And today's reading...from the prophet Ezekiel...it is about a time when the Israelites were exiled from their beloved home...Jerusalem...Zion. The Babylonians had sacked their holy city...and destroyed the Temple of Solomon.

And yet...in the midst of the Israelite's exile...at their lowest point...Ezekiel...speaks of redemption...and return. He is prophesying to a lost and bewildered people...and he is prophesying hope...the hope of returning home.

Just as all of the Biblical prophets...Ezekiel was channeling God in saying...“I myself will search for my sheep...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.”

This is a...lost and found...story. And because of that...it reminds me of my own church experience. Like you...I was very involved in my church's youth program...including our confirmation group.

I learned a lot in those years. I learned the basics of the faith. I was introduced to Christ.

I saw the work my church did. I saw how it propelled my mother into social justice causes...helping the poor and those in jail. I saw how Christ could inspire and change lives.

And Christ...opened me to a personal relationship with God. I prayed a lot...and I relied on God...and that helped me during my teen years.

And yet...somehow...when I left home...for college...and then out into the “real” world...I lost touch with God. I actually made a conscious decision ...not to rely as much on God. I had come to believe that relying on God was a weakness.

As I reflect back...I think of this as my own personal wilderness experience...I was wandering for years.

But the good news...and I mean the good news literally...as in the Gospel...the good news is it that what I had experienced as a youth...it helped keep the home fires burning.

I knew...somewhere buried inside me...that the church was a place of safety and comfort...a place where I was accepted. And this helped lead me...in later years...back to the church.

And so my hope for you...is that through your church experience...that you have gotten the sense of this as a church home...and that you will know that this is a place to which you can always return...even if...no especially if...you are wandering in the desert.

This is what my youth church experience did for me.

And I don't just mean Plymouth. Where ever you go in life...I hope you'll see the church...as a wonderful source of comfort...to know that there will be a church...where

ever you are...that is just right for you....and that the church...is keeping the lights on...waiting for you to come home.

In many ways...this act of confirmation...is an act of welcoming you home. It is a renewal of baptism vows...a renewal of the sacred covenant...between...you...and all of us...and with God.

And so my first message today is...and it's really to everyone...you are always welcome home.

And now onto the second thing I want to say. It relates to this morning's other reading...from the Gospel of Matthew.

This is the reading...that we probably looked at...more than any other...during our Confirmation process. And it too is about welcoming...the church's welcoming...Christ's hospitality...to those in need.

This passage...speaks to real world hospitality...so beautifully and simply...that it hardly needs explanation. Christ says: "For when I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

And the passage ends with a most profound twist...in Christ saying: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these...you did for me."

What a remarkable concept. If we want to help our brother Christ...we simply need to help our brothers and sisters in need. This is an all-inclusive call to help the neediest...whether they are thirsty or hungry...or lack clothing...or are sick.

St. Francis of Assisi famously counseled followers...saying this about spreading the Christian faith. "Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words."

Well you all followed those words to a T...you lived the Gospel. In your work at homeless shelters...and food pantries...and in helping feed and provide for an Iraqi Refugee family...you lived the Gospel.

And I'm guessing you all remember...the amazing life story...we heard from a counselor...at our overnight event.

Leah...was her name. She grew up...literally bouncing around from homeless shelter to shelter. She...and her mother and sister...they were regulars on the food pantry circuit.

Her mother had had a good career...and yet still somehow fell into a destitute situation...when she lost her job. And then she just kept falling...into drinking and drug problems. And then the abuse started.

And yet...here was Leah...standing in front of us...a remarkable success story. She was studying to be a social worker. She had somehow gotten through the abuse...and the homelessness...and still been able to study and get her degrees. She was a remarkably poised...and accomplished person.

There are two parts of Leah's story that especially stand out for me. First...she remembers vividly...the friendliness...of the workers in the shelters...and how much of a difference that made...for her as a young girl.

And then also...she recounted how she always loved Sundays – because that was the one day of the week...when she and her mother...and her sister...they went to church. It was the one day of the week...her mother wouldn't drink. It was a day off...from the physical and verbal abuse.

I especially love Leah's story...because it shows us...how much impact...we can have on the lives of others. Even if...only by...being kind to strangers...and welcoming them into our churches.

We talk here a lot about the idea of the "ministry of all laity"...the idea that all members are ministers...responsible for doing God's work.

Leah's story...profoundly demonstrates exactly what this means...profoundly shows...the power of our own...personal ministries.

And so the second point here...is simply this...don't under-estimate the impact you can have on other's lives.

Now we come to the third point...and it has to do with...**food**. Yes...we did spend a lot of time eating together this year.

But the meal I will remember most...is the last meal we shared together. I'm talking about...our closing communion...at the end of our final meeting...just two weeks ago.

Now...I think it's safe to say that you are a talkative group. You have a lot to say...pretty much all the time.

But I was deeply moved...as we quietly gathered around the communion table...and shared bread...and cup...and then together...so beautifully said the Lord's Prayer. It was a moment I'll never forget.

Without any instruction...you understood the importance of communion. You seemed to almost instinctively know exactly know what to do.

Communion is the centerpiece of what we do in Christian worship. We not only remember who Christ was...but we also share a meal together...a meal that is meant to be a foretaste of a new kind of world...a world in which everyone shares equally...in which everyone...is on the inside.

It's a world in which people of all backgrounds...and all ages...eat together...in the hopes of changing the world...together. It is a world where the so-called "least" in society...eat with the "most"...and no one goes home hungry.

From my own confirmation experience...the thing I remember best...is the time we all gathered...on top of the tallest building in Cincinnati. And Paul Long...the pastor...he brought out a candy bar and a coke. And we shared communion.

But I don't think it was just...the uniqueness of the candy bar...or the coke...that made this so memorable.

I think what I remember best...is Paul...being excited about it. I remember sensing...that it meant a lot to him. And that made an impression on me.

And so my third point is a personal one. I want you to know...how much our communion together...on that last meeting...I want you to know...how much...that moment meant to me.

Yes...this third point...is simply...to say thanks...from both Julia and me.

We consider it a privilege...to have had a role...in whatever small way...in your growth...and in your lives.

And as we now move next...to officially confirm you...and to welcome you into the church again...it seems especially fitting...that we will conclude today...with yet another meal together. It will be your first communion as members of the church.

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And so let me say...to you...and to everyone...that as we gather for communion today...whether you are young...or not so young...whether you are feeling low...or feeling on top of the world...or whether you were just confirmed...or even never confirmed...just remember this:

You are always welcome at this table. Welcome home again everyone.

Amen.

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