

A Testimonial Dinner

A Sermon by the Revd Craig Bartlett

Sunday, 15th May 2022 – The 5th Sunday of Easter, Year C

Reading: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Just before I left Canada for a couple of weeks' rest and resurrection in Korea, I joined the largest of the three congregations I serve, Tara United Church, for their Spring Buffet. It's their annual spring fundraiser dinner for the congregation – it was also the first time the church was able to gather, with members of the community at large, for dinner in three years. Just the fact that we did it was the most important thing about this buffet, even more important than the inside tip I learned: 'Go to the second sitting – there's extra pie available!'

It's at times like this that one learns at least a little bit about inclusivity. We welcomed members of the Tara congregation and the other congregations in our cluster. We welcomed members of the community at large and didn't ask them to which church they belonged, or if they belonged to any church. We welcomed members of our sibling churches, like the person from the Presbyterian church who has been helping us with improving the sound and picture quality of our worship service webcast. We even welcomed the adherent in our congregation who had the reputation of being a little needy and demanding – in fact, when she openly declared that she was coming back to church soon, I thought I saw a couple of our stalwart members give each other that look which said, 'Oh my – here we go again!'

Table fellowship – the decisions one makes about who one eats with – was, and still can be, a very important marker of one's status and station in life. These days, it's the concern of whom you want to be seen associating with. Are you seen with the country bumpkins, or are you hobnobbing with the jet set? Are you wasting your time on the nobodies, or are you making your presence felt among the movers and shakers? Are you seen with those who have suspect morals, or are you with the upright? In the case of trying to be a good Jew in the Roman Empire, are you accommodating, to some degree or other, the culture and society around you, or are you trying to stay pure, one of as a distinct group, making as little concession as possible?

In that vein, the story of Peter's defence for being associated with uncircumcised, non-kosher keeping Gentiles, as described in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, is not just a fine piece of oratory. It is a defence of his historic status as an apostle and a member in good standing of Israel, and an invitation to his Jewish siblings of the expansive nature of the Jesus movement. It is an invitation to view things differently. If you read through Acts, the author has been preparing us for this c-change moment, from the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit, to the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, to the call/conversion of Saul, to this point. In these and other stories, it's becoming clearer that the Spirit of God will move where it will, and that it is not restricted to those who are officially members of the People of God's First Covenant. We could say it is a defence of his testimonial dinner, with Gentiles.

If we were to look back on our lives as testimonial dinners, in which courses would we see God's movement in our lives? As we move closer to June, which is often associated with Pride in the SGM communities, and since my holy orders originate with MCC, here are some 'courses' which I identify as being important in my development.

My starter was one of embarrassment for me. It the early 1990s, when the United Church of Canada was trying to come to grips with what had happened at its 1988 General Council, after the Council passed the statement *Membership, Ministry, and Human Sexuality*, to take a step forward on the issue that became known in United Church circles as 'the issue'. Congregations were splitting, some people were deeply questioning their loyalty to the UCC, and concord was sometimes in short supply.

One Sunday, I was a sandwich at lunch with a classmate during my MDiv days. She had just done Sunday supply for the minister of an adjoining pastoral charge, and I was finishing up my Sunday preaching in my student supply appointment at the same time, so I arranged to invite her to my home to have lunch before she went back to Toronto. The conversation drifted between varying subjects, and she began speaking about the prospects she had for a new relationship. I blurted out the question, 'Do

you think he's a prospect for something long-term?' or something like that. She blushed a bit, hesitated briefly, and said, 'Well, *he* is *she*.' By the temperature change in my face, I could tell I was likely blushing a deeper hue. More importantly, I was uttering the quiet prayer, 'Dear Jesus, please open a wide, deep, cavernous pit in this floor and swallow me up in it!' Now, I prided myself on being a hip, accepting, and affirming person of gays and lesbians (the transgender component had not even registered at this time), but I wasn't able to catch little clues like how she continually referred to her new interest with *they* and *them* pronouns. How much I had to learn.

The salad/soup, awakening my appetite, came many years later, after I'd left Canada, become a 'done', then recovered my vocation to ministry, and became active with an MCC congregation in Seoul, I rediscovered the importance of that table fellowship as I shared lunch with the gathered fellowship, small as it was, either in neighbourhood restaurants or in our own shared lunches. I can now see it was in those situations where I began to hone my skills as one who provides pastoral care, learning how important it was to listen to people's stories, to the conflict and anguish, as well to the joys and celebrations.

The next course didn't go down as easily, at least not at first! It was during my brief stint teaching in Hanoi, Vietnam, when I became active in the ecumenical Hanoi International Church. At a men's fellowship gathering, it became clear to me what views some of the men in the congregation held on issues theological, social, and moral, and how different they were from mine. In fact, I was quite sharp with one man when he started to assert his views on LGBT issues, doing my best to cut him off with a sharp, 'Watch it! I have LGBT friends!' I thought I would need one of those sorbets served just before the main at formal dinners, to cleanse my palate! I wondered how I'd be able to relate to some of them in the future, let alone how they'd relate to me. A couple of Sundays afterwards, that same person I felt the need to cut off met me at church and proceeded to ask me about presiding at the service that Sunday – despite our disagreements, he trusted me as someone who was part of the fellowship and who would be able to help him when he needed assistance.

My most recent course, while I would not call it the final desert, certainly had sweetness to it. Youngoak and I were able to meet friends in Seoul for afternoon tea, after she picked me up from the airport. One of them was a faithful member of Open Doors MCC, who exclaimed after he attended his first service with us, 'I never knew church could be different from what I grew up with!' The other, another Open Doors member and our beloved friend, Edhi, is in her recovery phase after completing her gender affirmation surgery in Thailand. There's always a touch of sadness when I meet them – we feel the loss of Open Doors after it closed, and Edhi is experiencing what I would call 'burnout' after years of activism. Nonetheless, our friendship and fellowship is a treasured one, even if Edhi finds the sweets of afternoon tea too sweet and says, 'I need kimchi!'

Here is my testimonial dinner. It often features interaction with people of whom some Christians would say, 'How can you eat with these unclean people?' I would say these are times when I have been not just fed but nourished immeasurably. Your testimonial dinner may have different experiences from mine, but that's OK. None of them are possible without the new commandment, or as it is put in Latin, the new mandate from Jesus: 'Love one another'. All our dinners are an anticipation of the vision of John, where New Jerusalem appears, where God's very self dwells with mortals, and where all pain is taken away. I think supper's ready! Let us gather around the table. AMEN.